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North, South, and City: Novellas and Stories

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North, South, and City: Novellas and Stories

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ABSTRACT

The novellas and stories in *North, South, and City* follow key moments in the lives of a diverse cast of characters—including ethnic minorities on the margins of state influence, upper-class urban Thais, and Westerners at both ends of the economic spectrum—as they make their way through the changing landscape of contemporary Thailand.

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Critical Introduction

"Border without a boundary line": The Consequences of Cultural Difference in *North, South, and City*

In 1883, in an effort to stave off European colonialism by exerting European-like administrative control over semi-autonomous vassal states on the periphery of the Siamese kingdom, King Chulalongkorn dispatched royal commissioners to the four Lao provinces under Bangkok rule. Writing to one commissioner, he said:

> you must remember that if you are speaking with a westerner on the one hand and a Lao on the other, you must maintain that the westerner is "them" and the Lao is Thai. If, however, you are speaking with a Lao on the one hand and a Thai on the other, you must maintain that the Lao is "them" and the Thai is "us."
>
> —King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), 1883

In Chulalongkorn's attempt to define "Thainess" in different ways for different audiences, we see the beginnings of a prismatic conception of Thai identity that lies at the source of some of the deepest divisions in Thai society today. Before the pressures of western colonialism, the kings of Siam saw themselves as ruling over something more closely akin to an ethnically diverse empire than a nation. They measured their kingdom's reach in the number of people under its orbit, not by its area of land. By the 1890s, the effort to present Siam as a coherent, homogenous nation

(that, it would follow, should not have its outer provinces colonized by France or Britain) to the West also began to necessitate an internal homogenization of how Thai rulers saw race—the creation of the myth of a homogenous "Thainess" within the borders of Siam.

In the triangle of the westerner, Lao, and Thai in Chulalongkorn's message, we also see a microcosm of three forces—cosmopolitanism, cultural nationalism, and regionalism—that are key to understanding not only Thai history but also the most pressing issues in Thailand today. Each of these three forces are in complicated relation to the other, and each play a part in shaping the contexts that animate many of the stories that comprise my creative dissertation.

The collection aims for a diverse cast of characters who illustrate the social, political, and geographic fault lines that have emerged more prominently in Thailand over the last decade and a half. They include cosmopolitan Thais and foreigners who enjoy outsized cultural and economic power—sometimes responsibly, often not—amidst the country's vast working class, including migrant labor from rural provinces; villagers living in regions that were once so remote that allegiance to the idea of the Thai state was tenuous at best; members of border-crossing ethnic minorities often referred to as "hilltribes," who are themselves in complicated relation to both dominant lowland populations and to each other; soldiers and paramilitary who wield state-sanctioned power over religious or cultural minorities in the periphery, such as Southern Thai Muslims or "Red Shirt" protesters in the heart of the city; Westerners who came to the country out of altruism or academic or artistic interest, only to find that, while their status as Westerners afforded them many advantages, it alone did not insulate them from financial vulnerability and frustration.

In the essay that follows, I begin by elaborating on the historical and theoretical backgrounds that inform my stories. In the second section, I consider what it means for my

stories that they are linguistic and cultural translations, including translations without an original.

As Thongchai Winichakul describes in *Siam Mapped*, until Siam was asked by the British to define its western boundary with Burma in 1825, the premodern Siamese notion of borders differed from that of Western colonial powers. The Siamese understood the reach of their kingdom, which included a constellation of semi-autonomous states, in terms of relationships, not territory. Rather than a sharp line, Siamese kings understood their borders as ambiguous zones that might include vast stretches of uninhabited land or might not even be contiguous—what Thongchai calls "a border without a boundary line" (75). A series of treaties with colonial powers set the borders of Thailand more firmly, but in remote mountainous regions such as the Luang Prabang Range that separates Thailand's Nan province from Laos, where "Caravan" is set, this sense of tenuous demarcation persisted into the second half of the twentieth century. Bo Kleua, for instance, Apai's home district, would not receive electricity or paved roads until the 1980s. It's not surprising that conceptions of territory and allegiance would have more to do with local relations, with topographical and agricultural necessity, and with the network of overland trading routes that served as locals' main links to distant places: the mule caravans, which were almost always run by Yunannese Muslims called "Jeen Haw" in Thailand or Panthay in Burma. The "city men" from the provincial capital in "Caravan" may see themselves as occupants of the center to the montagnards' periphery, but while it is true that Nan was once the capital of one of those aforementioned semi-autonomous kingdoms, stretching into present-day Laos, in other contexts—namely in view of someone from Bangkok—those same "city men" would be regarded as nothing more than provincials, backwards in their own right, speaking a northern dialect that marks them as outsiders to the "standard" Thai of the central plains.

As a member of the Muslim Chinese ethnic group that has dominated overland trading routes for centuries, the Haw represents the epitome of the mobile montagnard who moves across what James Scott, in his book *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Southeast Asia*, terms "Zomia," the highlands that stretch from Burma, through Thailand, southern China, Laos and Vietnam. Scholars debate the extent to which various ethnic minorities who practice swidden, or "slash-and-burn," agriculture came to their semi-nomadic upland way of life out of choice or necessity, fleeing the lowland practice of taking slaves from neighboring peoples. Regardless, the Haw have always operated in the liminal space between the role of sanctioned trader and outlaw in the region, adapting to geopolitical developments and their consequences for the movement of people and goods across borders.

In 1960, in response to the Laotian Civil War and the related conflict in Vietnam, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and Army Special Forces began heavily recruiting and training ethnic minorities in the upland regions of Laos to serve in a "secret army" that would help resist the communist Pathet Lao ("Lao Nation"), who were supported by the North Vietnamese. Operating primarily from Thai territory, the U.S. also invested significantly in the Thai Border Patrol Police, an ad hoc paramilitary corps, as well as exiled Kuomintang (KMT), Chinese nationalist, forces. To pay for their secret army, the CIA encouraged poppy cultivation and opium processing and distribution by the same ethnic minorities they recruited. The Thai army and police had also been heavily involved in opium since the 1950s, the KMT became involved too, as did certain generals in the Royal Lao Army. In short, everyone had their hands in the opium trade.

Meanwhile, U.S. recruitment of Hmong, Iu-Mien, Lamet, and other minority groups to fight in the Laotian Civil War also exacerbated the ways that the conflict forced many of the

ethnic minorities in Laos to choose sides. For instance, depending on which side of the Nam Tha River they had settled, subgroups of Khmu either expressed allegiance to the Pathet Lao or the Royal Thai Army (and, in turn, Western allies), with unfortunate consequences for those who chose the latter (Olivier, 83). "Caravan" hints at this dynamic, too, as Saeng Thong, the fictional Khmu village Apai visits, is meant to be in Royalist territory. In such a situation—where the movement of people and goods becomes a highly contested, profitable, and dangerous process—borders take on added significance: they act as another tool for state-sponsored entities to exert control and an opportunity for more rogue groups to profit by transgressing them. This milieu in the background of "Caravan" is meant to put pressure on the situation in which Apai finds himself, to contribute an ominous sense of potential danger and to bring an element of the "ticking clock" to the caravan's return from Laos.

The historical problem of borders drawn in contested ways, guided by legacies of colonialism rather than by ethnic or cultural affinities on the ground, lurks—in some cases subtly, in others not—in the background of most of these stories. The Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909 divided a historically cohesive Malay region once known as the sultanate of Patani into two parts that are now separated across the Thai-Malay border. One became Thailand's three majority-Muslim, southernmost provinces. Forced assimilation by the Thai state and resistance by locals in those provinces who want more autonomy has resulted in a half-century-long insurgency that intensified in the early 2000s and led directly to the incident depicted in "Here, Where We Can Be Honest," and "The Rubber Tapper's Knife." When the unnamed narrator of "Here, Where We Can Be Honest," talks of "Patani," she refers not to the present-day province of Pattani, but to the idea of a region with a once-cohesive culture, the original sultanate now split by nation-state borders. Despite a century of policies including incentives for Buddhist

Thais to migrate to the region, requirements for schools to privilege the Thai language, etc., a strong sense of local history, culture, and historical grievance remains. Thai-ification simply hasn't worked in the deep South.

Similarly, many of the "Red Shirts" who occupied Bangkok's central shopping district and a symbolic section of the old city around Democracy Monument in 2010 (as depicted on "On Ratchadamnoen") were motivated by a renewed sense of regional pride alongside resentment of persistent inequalities reinforced by Central Thai conceptions of people from upcountry, especially the Isaan region in the Northeast, as ethnically or culturally Lao, and thus less sophisticated, intelligent, or capable. The marginalization of Thailand's peripheral regions is more than conceptual, furthermore; it is also administrative, made possible by the overwhelming concentration of wealth and power in the central ruling apparatus in the capital. Jay, the protagonist of "Silhouettes," gets a highly personal taste of the frustration that can come out of butting up against long-established networks of urban-concentrated patronage and privilege, even for a *luk khrung* (literally "half-child") with an American education.

The complicated relationship between Thailand and the West, including the Western values of liberalism and democracy, extends far beyond the history of colonial powers establishing borders and American attempts to use the country as a bulwark against the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. As Thongchai and others have pointed out, within the sphere of the postcolonial nation a political stance that looks like indigenous resistance to Orientalism can end up replicating Orientalist attitudes internally, reinforcing "the official or hegemonic discourse" and definition of Thainess "operating in its own particular cosmos over the subordinated or marginal ones" (9). One of Thailand's most pervasive national myths is the proud claim that it, alone among its Southeast Asian neighbors, was never colonized, but as

Rachel Harrison and Peter Jackson argue *The Ambiguous Allure of the West*, the term "semi-colonial" (as well as "autocolonial") might most accurately reflect the historical reality of the Thai experience in the colonial era. If the status of Thai autonomy in the nineteenth century was ambiguous, characterized by a combination of calculated resistance and consequential mimicry, so too is the push-pull relationship Thai culture has maintained with the West in the twentieth century. Harrison elucidates a number of examples in her introduction to *The Ambiguous Allure*, including the case of Phornthip Nakhirankanok (known as Pui), who won the title of Miss Universe as Thailand's representative to the contest in 1988. Though Pui's victory was, for many, a great source of national pride and a validation of Thai physical and cultural aesthetics on the world stage, Pui was also met with criticism for her less than pure Thai heritage as a mixed-race child with an American father. Raised in California, she spoke Thai with less than perfect native pronunciation. She was both better than and not good enough for the average Thai, an aspirational figure and an object of condescension. One imagines that Jay, the protagonist of "Silhouettes," attempting to make a good impression in Thailand while similarly caught between cultures, might relate to Pui's predicament.

With the exception of "Caravan," which is set in the early 1960s, all of the stories in this collection are set between 2004-2010, a period that witnessed dramatic changes in contemporary Thai society. The year 2006 can be seen as a particularly notable inflection point in this regard. Perhaps the most significant change during this time period involved the exposure of political fault lines based on class and region that had largely been dormant for the last thirty years. Since Bhumibol Aduladej was named king just after the Second World War as a relatively obscure nineteen-year-old, the institution of the monarchy had re-consolidated power, culminating in

2006, when Bhumibol celebrated 60 years on the throne and was universally adored by his subjects like no other monarch in the world. A common narrative is that the monarchy, despite deriving all of its power from the strength of its symbolism and popularity, helped to hold together the Thai social fabric when it became strained, as in 1992, when King Bhumibol put an end to clashes between the military government and pro-democracy protesters by summoning their respective leaders, General Suchinda Kraprayoon and Chamlong Srimuang, to a televised meeting at his palace in which he ordered them to get along. Some scholars might take a more cynical view and point out the ways that the overwhelming influence of the monarchy and its tacit support for military intervention in domestic politics as a stabilizing force has actually damaged Thai civil institutions and made the country less stable in the long run, with its seemingly unending cycle of military coup, new constitution, a brief period of democratic elections, and another coup. Such critics might also point out the enormous financial holdings of the monarchy and its continued influence on a system of aristocratic patronage as old as the first palaces themselves. Still, in June and the months following of 2006, it was not uncommon to see almost everyone on the Bangkok skytrain wearing a yellow shirt to work, in honor of the day of the week on which Bhumibol was born.[1]

Around the same time (2005-2006) that Thailand's exaltation of its king was reaching its zenith, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's government became the target of protests by a group calling themselves the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). Comprised largely of middle- and upper-class people from Bangkok, the group became colloquially known as the "Yellow Shirts." Their leader, the media mogul Sondi Limthongkul, often framed their message

[1] Thai custom assigns a different color to each day of the week, corresponding to the celestial bodies/Hindu deities associated with the day. Monday, the king's birthday, is yellow.

with slogans such as "We Will Fight For the King." Despite the support of a few minor royals at rallies, the monarchy, as it always had, scrupulously maintained the public image that it was above politics. Still, when a military coup deposed the popular (and, many would argue, corrupt) Shinawatra in September, just months after the elaborate celebrations of Bhumibol's sixty years on the throne, it was difficult not to speculate that the coup was at least quietly sanctioned by the palace because Thaksin was seen as a threat to the power of the traditional elite.

Taksin's ouster caused a schism that pitted the "Yellow Shirt" supporters of Royalist, centralist status quo, including many of the urban upper class and the vestiges of the traditional system of aristocratic patronage, against the group colloquially known as the "Red Shirts"—a combination of overlapping interests including people who supported the former prime minister, people who felt compelled to agitate on the part of the rural (and poorer) provinces in the North and Northeast, and academics and democracy activists as well. Meanwhile, it was difficult for an independent observer not to see the conflict as battle between two camps of hyper-wealthy elites—the nouveau riche Chinese-Thai businessman Thaksin on one side, the entrenched aristocracy on the other—with the "people," the subject of speeches on both sides, merely pawns in their high-stakes political game.

These political developments ushered in a period of unrest for Thai society. The failed crackdown on the Red Shirts in which Simon finds himself caught up in "On Ratchadamnoen," precipitates not only a change in the course of *his* life, but, off the page in real life, a more forceful crackdown by the Thai military in May of that year that took more than 80 civilian lives. The two sides, Red and Yellow, continue to be divided not only by allegiance to politicians but, because of the historical factors I touch on above, by class, culture, and even ethnicity. Thaksin's opponents argue that his policies benefitted the billionaire politician and his cronies, not the rural

poor, but though Thaksin was the wealthiest man in the country, his genius was his populism. As prime minister he mobilized vast segments of the country's lower classes in the north and northeastern parts of the country in ways that they had never been before, making them an electoral force.

Yet, results from a 2016 referendum on a new, junta-endorsed constitution indicated that a majority of Thais were willing to sacrifice civil liberties for stability, even if it meant reduced freedom of speech and uncertain access to a fair trial for those who criticize people in power. The October 2016 death of King Bhumibol quieted political opposition and gave the military further reason to delay a return to full democracy, but the fissures that emerged during the protests of 2008-2010 persist, and it remains to be seen how they will manifest themselves in the future.

Part II: Literary Dubbing and the Impossible and Necessary Task of Translation

No western foreigner to Thailand appears in the first three stories in "North, South, and City," roughly the first half of the manuscript, and the final four stories, though they feature an English-speaking focalizing point of view, are all set against the background of cultural, political, and sociological contexts specific to Thailand. In the first three stories, the language in which the characters exist on the page (English) is not the language that the reader is meant to understand they inhabit in the world of the story (Northern Thai, Melayu, Iu-Mien, etc.). These stories exist as translations with no literary original. They are "born translated," as Rebecca Walkowitz puts it in one sense of her formulation, "*written as translations*, pretending to take

place in a language other than the one in which they have, in fact, been composed" (4). Writing this year in two articles in *PMLA* and *Modern Fiction Studies*, Ben Tran coins the term "literary dubbing" to describe this mode, "wherein the author writes and translates simultaneously" (154).

Regardless of whether or not we choose to use the term "literary dubbing" to describe it, the mode isn't new, of course. Shakespeare's dubbed Italians, French, Africans, and Romans are obvious early examples. I don't take the mode's long history as reason to dismiss its contemporary significance, however. It's clear that whether or not globalization has encouraged literary dubbing, it feels as widespread as ever. A casual observer might see recent books in the mode by Jack Livings, Daniyal Mueenuddin, J.M. Coetzee, Karan Mahajan, Joanna Luloff, Susan Barker, and Viet Thanh Nguyen as a sign that Goethe's famous proclamation has finally come true: "The epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach." It's fair for critics like Tran to feel the urge to *stall* its approach, however, or at least encourage us to take the time to ask how these kinds of works shape our perceptions about what world literature means, and to describe, in greater depth and detail, how it is produced and consumed.

I am particularly drawn to Tran's conversation about literary dubbing for several reasons.[2] First, he concentrates on literature about Southeast Asia, an obvious overlap with my interests. Second, as I have said, literary dubbing is a mode I find artistically rewarding, and Tran's more specific focus on it seems potentially fruitful to me. More importantly, I think literary dubbing can serve as a kind of extreme test case for our ideas about what works, and why, in other genres or modes of literature that attempt to translate cultures for an English-

[2] I don't love the term "literary dubbing" itself as a name for the mode it aims to describe, because I think the implied analogy to film is imperfect, but I will continue to use it here for the sake of simplicity.

speaking audience. Finally, I think it's fair to say that Tran's conclusions about the ethical valence of the mode are still in the process of formation. In his writing on the topic one feels him struggling between two poles of interpretation. On one had, he doesn't want to make pronouncements about literary ethicality that endorse the assumption that the value of a literary voice is connected to the "authenticity" of the author's identity. At the same time, the question of ethics quickly becomes unavoidable in this conversation about the power and effects of the English language and of stories told in English. Out of what may be a self-preserving impulse to shape the conversation, I feel compelled to jump in.

Thinking about the processes and effects of translation isn't only relevant to my English-free fictional worlds, of course. Translation in a broader sense of cross-cultural interpretation and exchange is central to all my stories. Indeed, Walkowtiz's conception of "born translated" literature encompasses a capacious range of modes in addition to what Tran calls literary dubbing. It also includes literature that is "*written for translation*, in the hope of being translated." These kinds of works are often not only *for* translation but *about* translation, Walkowitz shows. They display a meta-translational quality (my term, not hers) in which "translation functions as a thematic, structural, conceptual, and sometimes even typographical device" (4). Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, with which Walkowitz spends extensive time, would not fall under Tran's rubric of literary dubbing, for instance, because while the narrator's (Changnez's) native language is Urdu, Changez calls attention to his purposeful use of his fluent English in his second-person address of the unnamed narrattee, the "you" who is the target of the novel-length monologue.

My manuscript shares the aims of a "critical cosmopolitan" imagination that, rather than working from universalist assumptions of a single global political space, invokes a more

localized process that attempts to open up and encourage "spaces of discourse, identifying possibilities for translation," including not only linguistic but cultural translation (Delanty 42). And yet, despite the fact that I lived in Thailand for nearly a decade, as I write from Knoxville, Tennessee, I am acutely aware that I am not a local agent of these critical cosmopolitan processes in Thailand, which are, as much as anything, about the *self*-transformation that can occur when individual societies embrace moments of receptivity to the global. Whether a book like mine can perform this function in the West, or whether it merely expands and reinforces the dominance of global English and the normative assumptions that come with it, is an open question.

"When are you going to admit that you can live in this language?" the narrator is asked by his girlfriend in Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (168), a request that not only encourages him to have confidence in his ability to speak Spanish, but also alludes to his misgivings about his role as translator. As I considered the range of localities, orientations, and experiences I wanted to portray in my collection during its composition, my attempts to "live" in a non-English-speaking narrative life-world for half of the manuscript were often a point of pride for me as a writer. When I stepped back to consider my work through the lens of the critic, however, my use of this mode has at times also been a source of insecurity, leaving me feeling vulnerable to charges of "voicing over" the people and places I depict. Here, I want to examine the "born translated" aspect of my collection and, especially the "dubbing" of its first three stories, and attempt to think through my own competing impulses towards it.

In its radical attempt to make irrelevant the dichotomy of fidelity versus freedom in translation, Walter Benjamin's 1917 essay "The Task of the Translator" is a landmark of

translation theory. Rejecting the idea that the value of any work of art is contained in the message it communicates, Benjamin seeks to elevate translation to an autonomous art form, the goal of which is to "express…the most intimate *relationships among languages*" (77, my emphasis). "Relationships," not content, are Benjamin's concern, because all languages are merely imperfect approximations of "pure language," the extra-linguistic unity of everything anyone has ever tried to communicate before its inevitable deterioration in our worldly tongues. This is where Benjamin's theory extends into messianic territory, as pure language is pure meaning—the language that God would speak if he were to address humanity simultaneously and telepathically on the topic of global warming or why we should stop watching the Kardashians.

If, like a fragment of a broken vase, the source language only hints at pure language's full shape,[3] then the task of the translator isn't to make a copy of that original fragment, but a new, different "counterpart" that "make[s] both of them recognizable as [different] fragments of [that] vessel" (81). The source language should thus *change the state* of the target language, put it "powerfully in movement" (Pannwitz, qtd. in Benjamin, 82). The German translator should not seek to Germanize Greek, for example, but to Graecize German. In that change, and the successive changes that constitute a text's "afterlife," says Benjamin, we begin to apprehend the larger whole of pure language.

Notice how the traditional poles of translation—fidelity to reproduction and freedom to interpret—are made irrelevant in this model. In his privileging of continuous deferral and difference, his displacement of an authentic original and an accurate copy in favor of a third

[3] In the practice of translation, the "source" language is the original, foreign language, and the "target" is the language into which the source is translated.

thing—the new fragment of the larger vase of pure language—that happens as a result of linguistic engagement, Benjamin anticipates several different ways of thinking about language and translation (and, indeed, culture): (1) a utopian belief in the universality of experience (even if in Benjamin's conception this can only be translated through the Word of God); (2) Derridian différance, or meaning's perpetual deferral in language (despite the telos implied by no. 1); and (3) the aforementioned "third thing," an expression of the relationship *between* languages.

For Benjamin, as for most translation theorists who followed him, translation is both impossible and necessary. Ortega y Gasset, writing in 1937, spoke of "The Misery and Splendor of Translation"—"misery" because of the incommensurability of both languages and cultures, "splendor" because translation "force[s] the reader from his linguistic habits and oblige[s] him to move within those of the [foreign] author" (Ortega y Gasset 1992, qtd. in Venuti, 74). Benjamin's theory of linguistic difference can also serve as a model for the negotiation of cultural difference, which is, like translation, both impossible and necessary.

Robert Olen Butler's story "Mid-Autumn," a second-person dramatic monologue narrated by a pregnant Vietnamese mother to the child in her womb, announces its audacious act of translation—and its faith in pure language—in its opening line: "We are lucky, you and I, to be Vietnamese so that I can speak to you even before you are born" (95). The narrator tells her story from Louisiana, where she lives with her American husband, who was presumably an agent of the U.S. war in Vietnam. It is possible to translate, Butler's story asserts, not only from imagined Vietnamese experience into a story for an American audience, but also from mother to unborn child. "Above all you must listen to my heart," the narrator says. "The language is not important."

Butler's belief that language "is not important," that it needn't keep us from

communicating with and through each other, is enacted by translation on several levels in the story. Through the second-person address, the reader at once inhabits a) the place of the unborn child, the "you" addressee; b) the mother, through the sharing of the close second person point of view; and c) the collective "we" of the book's audience. The baby is indeed Vietnamese but she is also American, an embodiment of a hybrid space that the story—which is American but also, imaginatively at least, Vietnamese—asks us to grant it, through our readerly suspension of disbelief and assumption of a multiplicity of perspectives.

As a translation without an original text, as a fabrication from the whole cloth of the pure language of the author's imagination, "Mid-Autumn" is an example of literary dubbing. Butler portrays this act of speaking across linguistic and cultural difference as possible through (on the part of the speaker) courage, strength, the ability to strip down to fundamental essences, and (on the part of the listener) receptivity. In the narrator's description of dreams in which she hears her own mother speaking to her in the womb, just as she now speaks to her son, she describes "her voice plunging like a naked swimmer into that sea and swimming strongly to me, who waited beneath the waves" (95). It's a heroic image for what, in Butler, is an optimistic impulse to connect.

Critical receptions of Butler's translations range from unrestrained praise, to measured respect, to outright hostility. Mark McGurl, describing Butler's stories as an act of ventriloquism, acknowledges the "palpable" respect for cultural difference in the story, in which Butler "testifies to his liberal sympathy with the other, and pledges fealty to the Internationalist ideal of peace through cultural exchange." In McGurl's choice of the verbs "testifies" and "pledges," however, we hear a skepticism about Butler's motives, a framing of them as "performance," a word that carries connotations of both virtuosity and inauthenticity (392). Such virtuosity can be

immensely pleasing for the reader—the bold move raises the stakes, and by and large Butler delivers. *Good Scent From a Strange Mountain* won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize. But McGurl also suggests a less-generous (or credulous, depending on your critical stance) interpretation of Butler's faith in translation, that it "betrays a potentially aggressive, or at least self-serving, will-to-mastery of the other." In "Mid-Autumn," Butler tries to diffuse this dynamic by making the story about the mother's dignity. Paradoxically, though the story is translated into English by Butler, the mother uses Vietnamese to conduct "a private conversation" with her child that excludes her American husband and their English-saturated environment. Even as she makes the practical choice to live in America with the "good man" who loves her, the story suggests that her husband will never occupy the same place in her heart as her first Vietnamese love, who died in the war. The exact circumstances of her first lover's death and her subsequent relationship with the American are left ambiguous in the story; we don't know what side her Vietnamese love fought for, for instance. On one hand, knowing such specifics could have tremendous implications for how we read the story. If her Vietnamese lover was killed by Americans, we understand her situation very differently than if he fought alongside them. On the other hand, many would argue, U.S. intervention bears responsibility for the level of suffering endured on both sides. Another valid reading might hold that, while the specifics are certainly important to the inner life of the narrator, her reticence to talk about them now that she has moved to Louisiana—and thus the exclusion of a more specific account of the pain caused by the political situation in Vietnam—is true to the real-life experience of many survivors of war, both military and civilian, who cope with the trauma of the past by attempting to leave it behind when speaking in the present.

Tran has said elsewhere that he's not interested in rendering a verdict on the ethical

implications of literary dubbing. In "Negative Paradise: Rethinking Anglophone and World Literature as Literary Dubbing," however, he uses Butler as foil for what he reads as a more palatable example of literary dubbing, Rattawut Lapcharoensap's short story collection *Sightseeing*. Because the act of translation depicted in "Mid-Autumn" "aims for cultural authenticity…with an indifference to language," Tran says, Butler opens himself up to criticism for his "troubling appropriation of Vietnamese voices…while romanticizing cross-cultural empathy without accounting for the racial inequalities and violence endemic to the imperialistic U.S. military presence in Vietnam" (154). Though Tran lets other critics level the harshest interpretations of Butler, one gets the sense that he finds Butler, as one of many "Anglophonic representations of non-English-speaking others [that] fail to acknowledge linguistic difference" and the legacy of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, to be on the wrong side of "the politics that contextualize translation" (155).

Tran casts Rattawut in a more flattering light.[4] He argues that the stories in *Sightseeing* "reappropriat[e]" and "problemitiz[e]" literary dubbing through a self-awareness of the irony inherent in attempting to give Thai characters more agency, specificity, and presence in English literature—to de-Orientalize them, essentially—by writing them in a language that is not their own. Through a series of insightful close readings, Tran shows how Rattawut writes the socio-political history of American influence on Thailand into his stories, including the Vietnam era and its effect on an expanded tourism industry in Thailand, the simultaneously seductive and repulsive forces of an American culture industry, and an asymmetrical economic relationship with the West. In one of the book's most obvious examples, the brothers in the story "At the

[4] I follow the convention in Thailand of referring to Thais, including authors and historical figures, by their first names.

Café Lovely" have lost their father due to a factory accident in which he was crushed under a crate "full of little wooden toys waiting to be sent to the children of America" (Rattawut 26). Already up against hard times, the older brother spends all of his money on a couple of McDonald's hamburgers, only to watch the narrator vomit his back onto the floor. While some reviewers call similar symbolism in the book "ham-handed," Tran sees it as a way to foreground how English is a "father tongue" that permeates semicolonial Thailand, even for individuals who can't actually speak it, as a result of "market forces that have turned Thailand into an erotic and exotic paradise for tourism," a source of cheap labor, and a new market for American goods (Strauss; Tran 166, 165). For Tran, this meta-thematic aspect of Rattawut's stories is key. As in the scene in "Farangs" when Uncle Mongkhon explains to the narrator that he keeps his English-language sign advertising elephant rides to tourists grammatically incorrect because the tourists like it that way, because it plays to their idea of what an authentically flawed translation in Thailand should look like, the story is aware of the normative assumptions and effects that accompany the language in which the author has chosen to render it.

I am inclined to give Butler more credit, and Rattawut a little less, than Tran. If Rattawut's stories are self-aware of the paradoxical nature of literary dubbing, the opening paragraph of "Mid-Autumn" clearly announces that it is, too. When the mother in "Mid-Autumn" says "The language is not important," she's acknowledging that, even in Vietnamese, her language of address may be imperfect for her purposes. Like Uncle Mongkon, she knows what she's doing and she chooses to do it anyway. For both of these characters, the ends justify the means: Uncle Mongkon deliberately sacrifices accuracy to get the customers he wants, and the mother will tolerate the inadequacy of spoken language to communicate a message she feels is important. It's an imperfect solution, not without its negatives but not worth abandoning,

either—not unlike the practical decision to marry an American who is kind but unable to evoke the same depth of emotion as a lost Vietnamese lover.

Reflexivity can certainly be effective in fiction that depicts, depends on, or works by a process of translation. In my own stories, I see elements of reflexivity where they were never consciously planned. In "Caravan," Apai has a persistent problem with an inability to read the inner lives of the people in his orbit, including his wife Chanpen, the Haw, Boua, and Aek. Whereas the Haw has the ability to "read the whorls in [mules'] coats" for information about their health or even "for signs auspicious or troubling" about the journey ahead, Apai wonders "what it meant that he found it so difficult to interpret the people who mattered most in his life…if it [was] a defect in his own ability to read their hearts" (15, 23). Chanpen is frustrated with him because she sees him as "unaware of the effect he had on people or of what they needed from him. Or what they intended to take away" (80). And in an earlier (and perhaps future) draft, Apai picks up the piece of paper Aek and his unidentifiable companion view by candlelight in the forest, but he is unable to decipher it because he is illiterate in Thai. Similarly, in "Silhouettes," while Jay finds himself easily "read" by locals who identify that he is "not one of their own," he observes Krit, Dao, and Elle with a desire "to read their thoughts from their facial expressions" but finds it "impossible" (131, 155-56). Like Apai, Jay's inability to read others leaves him vulnerable and unprepared for events that wound him.

This question of legibility operates in a complicated fashion in "Caravan." Apai's inability to read others clearly puts him at a dangerous disadvantage in many situations. At the same time, however, the story means to suggest that, for people on the margins like the montagnards it depicts, the condition of illegibility can also be of benefit, as illustrated by the Haw's point to the men from the provincial capital about how the legibility of rice suited the

aims of ruling elites in the past who controlled their subjects through taxation of the easily readable—-and therefore easily assessable—commodity. Upon reflection, I think "Caravan" could benefit from a moment where Apai questions the benefits versus the costs of facilitating wealthy lowlanders' trade by serving as their guide. While arrangements such as his may benefit individuals, perhaps, Apai might think, it would better in the long run for his people to let the city men fend for themselves in the forest.

I notice, too, a frequent syntactical construction in which my characters wonder out loud if the correct interpretation of a situation is X or Y or Z. "Had he taken the tiger's life, had the tiger given it, or had it been something else entirely?" Apai wonders (72). Later, he similarly asks if the tiger, which he thinks he sees on the slope above him as struggles in the river, "had come to witness this moment, or to protect him, or to take her revenge" (82). Attempting to process the affair she has just consummated, even Chanpen muses, "I am just wondering if it's this morning, this light, or if it's really me" (77). And Apai constantly wonders what is happening inside his baby's head: "Did she feel fear, or something more like excitement? Did she have memories? Her eyes told him that she did…. Or maybe, as usual, she was simply hungry" (92). Others stories have similar syntactical habits. Jay isn't sure if Malee is "smiling because she got the joke, because he was smiling, or because that was simply her way" (131). Kevin watches Sonya from across the crowded club and finds himself unsure if "her enthusiasm [is] genuine, or an exercise in political correctness" (219). On the tower with Ollie, he says, "I didn't know whether I wanted him to take it more seriously, or if I appreciated his cynical levity" (268). To varying degrees, these are all characters deeply unsure of their ability to read the people and places around them, to interpret the signals the world sends their way.

A critic might suggest that the vulnerability and insecurity that comes with characters'

interpersonal or cultural illiteracy in these stories dramatizes an authorial concern with the gaps and flaws that inevitably result when one attempts a literary act of translation, and serves as an acknowledgement that true "authority" is never possible in this type of project. I would not dispute such a thesis. As I have written elsewhere, however, intratextual reflexivity regarding acts of translation can also be a double-edged sword.

"Why was I born between mirrors?" asks Adam, the protagonist of Ben Lerner's novel *Leaving the Atocha Station* (181). Much more than Rattawut's or Butler's narrators, Adam is hyper-aware of the power of language—especially globally-dominant English—to warp and obscure and overwrite its object of translation. One manifestation of his self-reflexivity is a more extreme version of the "or-orientedness" I notice above in my own work. At times it seems that *or* is Adam's favorite word, a result, partly, of living in Madrid, a place where for much of the novel he can hardly make out the meaning of what's being said: "she might have described swimming in the lake as a child, or said that lakes reminded her of being a child, or asked me if I'd enjoyed swimming as a child, or said that what she'd said about the moon was childish" (14). In Lerner this dramatization of a constant state of unease with the contingency of translation—both when Adam attempts to communicate in Spanish and when he attempts to narrate his experience in English—makes for an intellectually stimulating and hilarious read. However, the novel is also aware of the potential for its self-awareness to slide into solipsism. Isabel, Adam's Spanish girlfriend, assigns "a plurality of possible profound meanings" to the koan-like snippets of Spanish Adam dangles before her to mask his lack of fluency ("Blue is an idea about distance, or Literature ends in that particular blue"). "She intuited from those fragments depths of insight and latent eloquence," Adam explains, "and because she projected what she thought she discovered, she experienced, I liked to think, an intense affinity for the workings of my mind."

Times are good when Isabel can convince both herself and Adam that she is in fact "imbuing [his] silences…with tremendous intellectual and aesthetic force," when the act of translating without any real referent leads to a fractal-like depth of possibility in both language and sex:

> I believe she imbued my body thus, finding every touch enhanced by ambiguity of intention, as if it too required translation, and so each touch branched out, became a variety of touches. Her experience of my body, I thought, was more her experience of her experience of her body…and my experience of my body was her experience once removed, which meant my body was dissolved, and that's all I'd ever really wanted from my body, such as it was. (47)

This dissolution of selfhood is sublime while it lasts, but as in Butler, a suspension of disbelief (for the characters) is required to perpetuate the experience. "She projected," Adam tells us in the previous passage, and he "liked to think" that Isabel experienced what he thought she did. For Adam, this kind of translation by mutual projection may not represent dissolution, but its opposite: an infinite regression, like two people facing each other between two mirrors. Not a barrier to understanding, exactly, or a clear opportunity for greater understanding, but understanding perpetually reproduced and deferred. Eventually, Adam says, though Isabel remained willing to "let me believe she believed in my profundity, on some level she was aware that she was merely encountering herself" (84).

This is the big risk with Adam's reticent, reflexive stance toward intercultural communication, and his author knows it. *Atocha Station* opens by asking if it is possible to have a "*profound experience of art*?" Implicitly, it also asks: Is it possible to have a profound experience of other people? Early in the novel Adam works on his (purposefully scrambled, infidelitous) translations of Lorca not exactly alone in the park, but with other people "at a distance, so that I could hear that they were speaking without hearing in which language" (15).

He feels most "euphoric" in this state of half-solitary non-understanding. Over time, we register a subtle shift in what this means for him. He learns to appreciate life in Madrid similarly to how he appreciates Ashbery:

> It was as though the actual Ashbery poem were concealed from you, written on the other side of a mirrored surface, and you saw only the reflection of your reading. But by reflecting your reading, Ashbery's poems allow you to attend to your attention, to experience your experience, thereby enabling a strange kind of presence. But it is a presence that keeps the virtual possibilities of poetry intact because the true poem remains beyond you, inscribed on the far side of the mirror.

At the end of *Atocha Station*, it seems that Adam and his friends will "miss each other," in the sense of longing, even though, in Adam's doggedly reflexive mind, they continually "miss each other" in the sense of a genuine understanding. For all my admiration of Lerner's novel, however, I wish that Adam could have shed a little more of the intellectual habit that shields him from over-optimism about the power of translation to negotiate cultural difference, and leads him instead to keep life's "virtual possibilities" intact at the expense of imperfect but sincere engagement. I applaud Adam's humble awareness of the power of English to misrepresent in its ever-expanding global reach. But detachment out of enlightened political consideration is not entirely different in its effects from detachment out of hegemonic, cultural arrogance. I grant that in literary fiction, whether the narrator tells his story from the position of the insider or outsider, whether or not the premise promises to deliver interesting new understandings about unfamiliar places, the heart of the story, the most compelling questions it answers, always seems to end up being about the character who occupies the focalizing point of view. But Adam's caution, his obsessive inward gaze, can make the *Atocha Station* feel like it's *only* about him, rather than, say, about his relationships with other people too. It's a hard and possibly doomed endeavor to

attempt to make some third thing from the meeting of two disparate and often conflicting linguistic and cultural experiences. But to not do it—to stay too comfortably within the hall of mirrors of one's own consciousness—leaves Adam a bit too close to the same self-centered position he was trying to avoid in the first place: still staring at himself staring at himself in the mirror.

While I recognize the utility that Tran sees in the reflexivity in the literary dubbing of authors like Rattawut and Viet Thanh Nguyen, I hesitate to hold reflexivity up as the technique that determines the effectiveness of fiction that narrates translation through literary dubbing or otherwise, whether in terms of its ethics or its aesthetics. Rattawut's reflexivity never risks the solipsism of Lerner's, but it also doesn't insulate *Sightseeing* from the challenges inherent in literary dubbing. Rattawut can build in all the thematic meta-translation he wants, but in his characters' dialogue, for instance, he still bumps into old problems. He wants to, as he has said in interviews, avoid the kinds of depictions typically found in literature in translation in which Asian characters are "humorless, self-serious, Zen-koan-speaking people for whom laughter and humor, however light or dark, seemed entirely impossible" (qtd. in Kogos, 179). Thus, his characters' dubbed dialogue is highly idiomatic, often bawdy and cleverly funny. For a reader unfamiliar with the Thai language, it's also easy to digest. For readers fluent in Thai, however, it requires a much higher threshold of suspension of disbelief, since they can't help solving the equation in reverse—asking, even less-than-consciously, what is the equivalent Thai phrase for that line of English dialogue spoken by the Thai character on the page. It requires, in other words, more generosity of Thai-speaking readers.

In "Negative Paradise," Tran takes as his framing metaphor a term from a short 1945 essay by George Luis Borges in which the author expresses his distaste for the dubbing of films,

calling it a "malign artifice" that creates hybrid "monsters" on the silver screen, "Greta Garbo with the voice of Aldonza Lorenzo." Although Tran maintains elsewhere that he attaches no ethical valence to the practice of literary dubbing itself, that he in fact rejects what he sees as an untenable obsession with the authenticity of identity and its connection to literary voice in the creative writing academy, in taking up this metaphor of the monster and applying it to literature in English written from non-English points of view, he sets intimidating terms for anyone invested in the mode. The more palatable versions of these dubbed monsters of literature are aware of themselves as monsters, Tran suggests later; like self-reflexive Frankensteins, they process and articulate their own predicament. The Frankensteins who attempt to stand for a perverted form of universalism, who want to believe they're not that different from us, who try to simply walk down main street without anyone raising an eyebrow—those are another matter.

For Tran, Borges' feelings about filmic dubbing map neatly onto a conversation about literary dubbing. Borges, he points out, preferred subtitles to the dubbing of films because of his "awareness of a substitution as fake" (Tran 263). Borges characterizes dubbed film as "sinister," Tran says, because it "stems from the disjuncture between the language of address and the language of the characters."

While Borges' reaction to filmic dubbing is certainly interesting in the context of a conversation about literary dubbing, I'm not sure that Borges is the best spokesperson for an anti-universalist stance in regards to the possibilities of language. His story "The Garden of Forking Paths" is practically a manifesto for a belief in literature's infinite capacity for simultaneity, replication, alternative universes, and the resolution of impossible contradictions. It proposes the idea of a narrative that functions as "an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging and parallel times. This web of time—the

strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other through the centuries—embraces every possibility." We can substitute "place" for "time" in this passage to similar effect. In an interview, Borges says, "I think of reading a book as no less an experience than traveling or falling in love….reading [books]…are quite as real experiences to me as seeing London" (14). Borges is describing the process of suspending his disbelief so that the mimetic experience of reading feels as real to him as walking along the Thames or holding a woman's hand. When asked what accounts for the enjoyment of reading, he says, "The individual is getting away from his personal circumstances and finding his way into another world, but at the same time, perhaps that other world interests him because it's nearer his inner self than his circumstances….if I were [reading] now…I would think I was inside the book. And yet that book might be telling me a secret, or half-guessed-at things about myself." Borges' faith in the ability of literature to allow him to transcend the boundaries of space and time and language doesn't necessarily end with the experience of reading, either. In his characteristic half-joking-half-serious way, he declares his belief in the possibility of a communication of experience that doesn't require any language at all. In a different interview, he says: "I believe mental telepathy is not an unusual phenomenon, but something that occurs continually. For instance, on what are love and friendship based? They're not based on what a person says because we all say more or less the same thing. …there's a form of communication which goes beyond words. And this indubitably occurs with a literary work too."

Like Borges, I enjoy foreign films with subtitles, but I can't stand to watch a dubbed film.[5] I don't agree, however, with Tran's characterization of Borges' objection to filmic

[5] Curiously, that isn't the case in Thailand, among the middle and lower classes, anyway. Dubbed American blockbusters like *Terminator 2* and the *Fast and Furious* franchise are staple fare on long, intercity bus rides throughout the provinces, played at eardrum-puncturing decibal-levels and featuring what, to the untrained ear, sounds like the same voiceover artist for the hero of every film, performing in the false-baritone that one might

dubbing. He casts it as a theoretical one, whereas it seems to me that the problem for Borges is more visceral.

Like any narrative form, film requires suspension of disbelief, but not nearly as much, and not in the same ways, as literature. The ingredients of the enjoyment of film include more visual and audio verisimilitude and less suspension of disbelief about how thoughts, ideas, textures, and settings can be translated for the viewer through that medium. Most films carry this burden of audio-visual verisimilitude, which is why Hollywood producers spend so much money on special effects: certain kinds of faking are easier to spot on film, harder to ignore. Film doesn't ask us to imagine Godzilla, it shows us Godzilla.[6] Books, on the other hand, as a more radical translation of experience through and into language, require greater suspension of disbelief and greater participation on the part of the reader to fill in sights and sounds with her imagination. Although this heavier reliance on the suspension of disbelief may at first appear to be a burden for the medium of the book, it is actually one of its greatest assets. Borges experiences dubbing as "perverse" and monstrous not out of an intellectual awareness of what has been done to the characters on film—not out of, as Tran puts it, a discomfort with the ethics of "disrupt[ing] the body-voice continuum"—but because the dubbing simply leaves him unable to suspend his disbelief during the fiction ("Confession, 418). Tran never explicitly states the important role of the suspension of disbelief in his articles about literary dubbing, but I highlight it because I think it is key to why the analogy to filmic dubbing falls short when we try to parse out the significance and effect of dubbing in literature.

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reserve for the imaginary play of action figures or hand puppets. Borges nods to a similar popularity of dubbing in provincial Argentinia.

[6] I am generalizing here of course. Many directors—Hitchcock, for example—use the power of the unseen to evoke emotion from their audiences.

When Borges says of a favorite film, "I would see it with fervor for the ninth or tenth time if it were offered in the original version, *or in one I believed to be the original*," he isn't complaining about the act of fakery as much as fakery's failure to conceal itself. "The last point is important," he continues, because "worse than the substitution dubbing involves, is the general *awareness* of a substitution, of trickery" (emphasis mine). Borges would rather suspend his disbelief, he is saying, and live in the realm of imaginative art. Besides, he says, the quality of movies already isn't what it used to be. When Tran defines Borges' "negative paradise" as "a parallel world that gives the illusion of verisimilitude and brings the reader to an experience of the foreign and the exotic, but that is also linguistically off-kilter," we might think that the "illusion of verisimilitude" is as much a problem for Borges as the linguistic off-kilter-ness, that the fakeness is the issue for Borges (155). In fact, Borges' problem is an opposite one: he resents the places where real-life intrudes on the pleasures of fantasy. "Sight-seeing is the art of disappointment," he says, paraphrasing Stevenson. "This definition is suitable for the cinema and, with sad frequency, for the continuously unavoidable exercise called living." For Borges, the problem with a dubbed film isn't that it isn't original or authentic enough, it's that film's relative lack of flexibility as a genre—it's lower capacity to absorb a viewer's suspension of disbelief—prevents him from fully inhabiting the fake. It forces him out of the realm of imagination, of pretense, and into an awareness of his imperfect, "authentic" lived experience, where he would rather not have to be spending his time at the moment, thank you very much.

For the very same reason that the dubbing of the dialogue in fiction such as Rattawut's requires more generosity from Thai-speaking readers, these readers, I would argue, are more likely to bestow it (as would be, I also argue, Borges). Because they are fluent in both the source and target languages, they know how difficult—in many instances impossible—it is to create a

perfect translation, one that captures both the content and the spirit of the original, the intricate shades of tone and nuance of meaning. And because they truly understand the impossibility of the task, the terms of their reading experience are altered. They know the book isn't trying to trick them into believing it's natural for Thais to speak fluent, idiomatic English; instead, they accept from the beginning, with eyes wide open, what feels like a more transparent contract with the reader: Even though we both know this kind of translation is impossible, the book says up front, let's pretend for a moment that it's not, and see what new thing comes out of it. The "what-if" aspect of the mode is foregrounded, the suspension of disbelief requested and granted in greater portion right away.

It seems to me that there are two ways Tran's early arguments about literary dubbing could be interpreted—two logical conclusions regarding the ethics of the mode. The first is a call for a revaluing of translated work—in other words, more authentic representations of other cultures—over "dubbed" fictions by western writers (leaving aside for now the impossible question of who is "western" and who is not). The second is as a refusal to endorse the ascribing of value to a work based on the cultural authenticity of its authorial voice, insisting, rather, that contemporary readers and critics simply be clear and specific in their discourse about world literature. The latter argument would hold that, rather than ascribe an ethical valence to literary dubbing, it is more important to simply notice it and, by extension, notice how and why we value certain texts, and how and why those texts can come to comprise a field of world literature that risks, if we don't pay attention, becoming a literature that talks only to itself, conditioned only by its own English-language terms. Again, such an argument does not necessarily assign value to literary dubbing versus literature in translation; it simply asks us to pay attention to which is which.

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If all fiction is translation in the sense that all stories dub experience into language and narrative, then it may be the case that literary dubbing merely provides the most obvious reminder of the role of suspension of disbelief in this process. That doesn't mean that there aren't other factors that shape the ethical valence of our fictions. Many of the risks involved with writing about other people and places are aesthetic, including the risk of poorly-executed realism that reveals a lack of familiarity with or a misunderstanding of a people or place. These aesthetic shortcomings can become ethical problems, as when they become codified and reinforced in a larger hegemonic discourse. In this important sense, Graham Greene was wrong when he called *The Quiet American* "a story and not a piece of history" (5). Literature *makes* history as much as any academic discipline does; it becomes it. But the problem with the discourse of Orientalism, as Said points out, isn't Western interest in Asia per se; it's the way that Orientalists turned that interest into a self-affirming conversation that took place almost entirely in the West. Orientalism misrepresented its subject, but more importantly for the unfortunate internal consistency and staying power of its stereotypes, it was only talking to itself.

On one hand, in the sense that stories written in English, including dubbed fictions, are primarily read by English-language speakers, they are at greater risk of only talking to themselves. On the other hand, I believe there are several things we can to do avoid Orientalizing. The first two are mirror opposites of the primary characteristics of the Orientalist approach, which are the placing of too much credence in one's own authority, and easy generalization. Two strategies for avoiding these pitfalls, then, involve a converse of each of them: vulnerability and specificity.

The problem of generalization relates to the tendency of Orientalism to frame issues in

broad categories of White/Other, West/East, etc. What exactly is "our culture"? we might ask. Where does it and does it not overlap with "theirs"? "The Orient is not an inert fact of nature," Said writes (4). It is not—as Western Whiteness is not—monolithic. Responding in his 1994 introduction to how he felt his arguments had been misused, Said noted that his book is "explicitly anti-essentialist, radically skeptical about all categorical designations" (331). Racism is a persistent, pervasive, first-order problem in America and is highly relevant in our literary discourse. As I discussed in the first section of this introduction, it is takes many forms in Thailand, too. But for me to avoid the white/other trap, I need to think outside of broad categories by specifically contextualizing my project in an engagement with Thai literary history, historiography, and culture. Reading works in translation helps; reading in the original is often better. More importantly, though, the experiences I've had with Thai people, in Thai places, have had a tremendous impact on who I am, and I see my fiction as engaging in a conversation with those writers and readers, not pretending to offer an authoritative picture of their country.

Regarding vulnerability, avoiding the will-to-master is a hard one in an academic context, where "mastery over subject matter" is considered one of our reasons for being. One strategy to mitigate the risk of an Orientalist posture of authority involves assuming, in the writing, a different audience than might be expected for an English-language book—one located as close to Thailand as to Tennessee, in my case, even as I recognize that it is impossible to pinpoint the locus that is the "real" version of either of these places. "Today's born-translated works block readers from being 'native readers,'" Walkowitz argues, "those who assume that the book they are holding was written for them or that the language they are encountering is, in some proprietary or intrinsic way, theirs. Refusing to match language to geography, many

contemporary works will seem to occupy more than one place, to be produced in more than one language, or to address multiple audiences at the same time. They build translation into their form" (6). My stories block native fluency to varying degrees. One could point to many moments where local facts or assumptions are left unexplained. And then, on the other end of the spectrum, there are sentences like these, from "Silhouettes": "Everyone else was in their thirties—including Krit's wife, Dao—or their twenties, in the case of the recording artists and actors Krit knew through his work as an executive at GMM Grammy, Thailand's largest media and entertainment company" (136). In that story this sentence may not stand out as strange for most English-language readers, but imagine if a writer referred to "the recording artists and actors Bob knew through his work as an executive at MTV, an American cable and satellite television channel owned by Viacom, the world's fourth-largest media conglomerate." The writer must negotiate between often-conflicting objectives: to make the fiction feel accurate or "authentic," to use a word that should by now make us a bit uncomfortable, while also making it "readable" for people unfamiliar with the culture or place described. In some instances, as in the quotation above, I err on the side of readability, but in general I want to "block native fluency," in Walkowitz's words, to an extent that the effect is felt by the average American reader. Different stories do this in different ways. Jack Livings, author of the story collection *The Dog*, set entirely in China and often featuring only Chinese characters, has said that he wanted his writing in that book to have a "constricted" feel, sounding to the ear as if it was a work of translation. I do this too in the short, declarative sentences and limited vocabulary that the mother uses in her letter in "Here, Where We Can Be Honest," but in other stories, such as "Caravan," I want the close-third person narrators to think fluently, even at the cost of cultural accuracy. Ultimately I believe that every story presents its own unique problems, requiring their

own solutions. I also think, though, that as creative writers we spend a lot time talking about point of view—it might be the foremost topic of the writing workshop—when we should be supplementing this conversation with something that we rarely talk about, which we might call "point of audience."

Beyond "point of audience," there are other ways for a text to make itself vulnerable. Certainly, one of the pleasures of reading *The Quiet American* is the calm, detached, I've-been-here-for a long time reassurance of Fowler's narrative voice. It's voice that both reinforces and undermines the myth of Western mastery and expertise. He faults Pyle for not having learned the "real background [of Vietnam] that holds you as a smell does: the gold of the rice fields", etc., but at the same time his every word feels suffused with aching regret (25). Fowler and Pyle share plenty of Orientalist assumptions about Vietnam. Fowler infantilizes and metonymizes Phuong ("she was indigenous like a herb" 14). He uses her for physical and emotional comfort; at times he "made love savagely as though [he] hated her" out of fear of a future in which he had lost her (140). But, in what I consider to be the most important lines in the novel, he also acknowledges the fundamental limitations of his own perspective: "I knew I was inventing a character just as much as Pyle was," he says. "One never knows another human being" (133). Unlike Pyle, Fowler at least knows what he doesn't know, and he's not afraid to acknowledge it. His inability to know is, in fact, a central pillar of his worldview. His authority of experience—and his cynicism—comes hand-in-hand with humility.

I consider *The Quiet American* an incredible achievement. It is also, in its reflection of outmoded assumptions about Vietnam and the Vietnamese, flawed. It often feels like a book written by white men for other white men, but it is also honest about its desires and motivations, and in Fowler's cynical, world-weary way, it makes itself vulnerable to the world

it depicts. Reading it alongside E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, another book I greatly admire, has served as a reminder that a book's flaws often point to greatest strengths.

If there is a flaw in *Passage to India*, it is, similar to Greene, the faint air of condescension in Forster's frequent characterization of India as a "muddle" of chaos and misunderstanding (314). At the same time, what makes the novel so compelling is the level of specificity in Forster's deeply felt understanding of that misunderstanding—his intricate exploration of India's diversity and his deft ability to illustrate, from both British and Indian perspectives, how misunderstandings so often arise from a misapplication of good intentions on each side.

Near the end of the novel, still nursing his resentment of his English former friends after a misunderstanding that led him to think they had betrayed him, Aziz, the central Indian character in the novel, observes the English in a rowboat on a body of water that was also being used during the celebration of a Hindu festival. Still bitter, he reflects on how what he had previously thought to be empathy and understanding in his English friends was no more than the will to master: "This pose of 'seeing India' which had seduced him to Miss Quested at Changrapore was only a form of ruling India; no sympathy lay behind it," he thinks (343). Soon, however, he meets a former friend's son for the first time, and softens. "Until his heart was involved he knew nothing," he thinks. Though he hasn't yet forgiven his English friends for what he understands to be their betrayal, he agrees to take the boy out on a boat as well, setting up the novel's climactic scene in which the two boats collide and everyone is thrown, comically, into the water, a ridiculous imposition of the clumsiness of real life on the choreographed spectacle of the Hindu ritual. We all have the capacity to makes ourselves vulnerable, the novel illustrates—in fact, we hardly have a choice about it—and that is our

saving grace.

"Until his heart was involved he knew nothing," Forster writes, echoing Foster's belief that "One never knows another human being." These beliefs are the novels' reasons for being. Forster show us the ways that India is different from England, how its particular religious contexts influence its interpersonal relations. We can learn from these differences, he suggests, but in order to do so we must engage, at times even impose ourselves, make clumsy fools of ourselves and risk messing things up, as in the scene with the crashing boats, perhaps even risk hurting other people. Indeed, as in love, hurting other people in big ways and small is an inevitable result of human contact. The deeper we engage, the more potential for hurt. We can do our best to avoid it, but we shouldn't let the possibility, even the inevitability, incline us to separate ourselves from others. All fiction writing involves the risks of making oneself vulnerable to the stubborn limits and biases of the imagination and to one's own capacities as an artist. I believe that this particular risk is a risk worth taking.

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NORTH

Caravan

1962

I

In the thick of the trees the morning fog materialized all around Apai at once, like a cold breath exhaled from leaves, stones, and rivers. He had heard others describe this fog as washing out the landscape—as if some great spirit had scrubbed the world of its features. But why think of it as an absence? The white shroud saturated his senses and made his whole being more alert so that when it burned off, as it always did, the details of the landscape were almost hyper clear. For Apai, however, it was the fog writing itself into the world—not the clarity it left behind—that made everything feel full: the forest comforted by mist, its inhabitants freest to move unafraid of being seen, as they had before man came to these hills.

Apai leaned against the blue rock that had hidden him for hours, let the barrel of his rifle come to rest on the soft moss where he kept it poised among the stems of a fern. Stretching his fingers in his left hand, he felt the beginnings of a cramp. His shoulders, too, had been coiling up with more tension than he realized. He needed to head back for the village by noon, and he hoped he could get his boar by then. Since the time he happened to have boar meat on hand during one of their visits, Aek and the Politician's other men from the provincial capital had come to expect it as part of their pre-caravan ritual in the night spent in Apai's village, Baan Bo

Luang, before setting out. They would arrive from their four-day journey from the provincial capital tomorrow, hungry and entitled. It would be easier for Apai to meet their expectations than to deal with their complaints if he fed them squirrel.

Some people thought it was bravery or quickness or special knowledge that made Apai the best hunter in Baan Bo Luang, but those people knew little about hunting. Anyone who had hunted with him knew his real talent was much more mundane but no less rare: he was simply more patient than anyone else. Where most men could sit in silence in a steady rain for four hours, he could do it for ten without letting his mind wander to food. Whereas most would rest their rifles on the ground until needing to raise them, Apai kept his pointed at the target—in this case, a patch of forest floor where wild boar came to turn over leaves in search of grubs.

The only tiger he had ever killed, earlier that year, happened not because he set out to do it but because he found himself surprised in a situation like this, stone-still before dawn with an eight-foot female sliding into his peripheral vision like a carp through murky water. She stared at him over her shoulder, about fifteen arms' lengths away. She hesitated, seemed ambivalent, almost bored. He was lucky she was old. Still, his muzzle-loading rifle felt feeble in his hands against the rippling length of the animal before him. In her direct stare he might have succumbed to the certainty that the thread of his life was about to be snapped, that in a blur she would be upon him even if he could manage a shot. He wasn't aiming for any particular spot when she pounced, but his first and only shot went through her left eye. Now, as he often did while struggling against sleep, he saw her ghost emerging from the underbrush behind him, patient and curious, the sheen of her coat appearing silvery-white. She approached from her good side, only her right eye visible, until she stopped again and turned her head to reveal the dark cavity next to a petrified eye, a line of dried blood hugging the side of her muzzle. Under rainclouds and thick

canopy it could have been any time of day or night. She was trying to tell him something, but what it was he could not guess.

His fingers woke before his eyes at the impatient rustling about fifteen yards in front of him. His gun raised as if on its own accord. He hadn't expected the young boar to come this early in the morning. He waited for it to move a bit closer. It turned itself at profile, its spine casting an angry arch in his sights, its snout probing greedily in the leafy mud. It had only just begun to grow tusks; it was biding its time on its own until it was large enough to challenge the dominant boar of some sounder. Better, thought Apai, that it wasn't a full-grown specimen. It would be heavy enough to carry back to the village as it was.

As its snout whipped up at the impact of his bullet and its body crumpled to the bed of leaves, Apai felt less of the buoyancy that usually coursed through him after a kill. The men arriving from the city would surely take it for granted, as if the wild boar in these mountains simply trotted into the village and jumped on the fire. At least the Jeen Haw, with his peculiar brand of Yunannese Islam, would appreciate the savory meat and the time and sweat it took to earn it.

Apai lay down the banana leaves that would provide a clean surface on which to work. He gripped his knife between his teeth, rolled the boar onto its back and stepped on its left hind foot so he could spread its legs and remove its testicles. These he would save for Chanpen and the Haw—his wife, especially, would be pleased. Soon, there would still be enough light to butcher the boar with the meticulousness for which he was known. There were times he wished he could work less exactly, but like his penchant for solitary hunting and the good or bad luck that his phantom tiger might bring, it was part of him now.

#

A fully quenched moon the following night, not a sliver of light entering the house through the spaces between its weathered bamboo slats.

Lying beside Chanpen, Apai could feel her anxiety as if it were conducted across the viscous air. For three and a half years, since they were married, they had tried to conceive a child. In two days Apai would leave for another journey with the caravan and tonight would be their last chance for privacy until he returned, because tomorrow the Haw would arrive to stay with them while overseeing preparations.

They had just lay down; Apai hadn't yet put his arm around his wife. This was a nightly crossroads: whether to immediately cradle her in a comforting posture for sleep or invite her attention with caresses more alert and open to the possibilities of expressing their love. His body was sore from the hunt but he felt her awake next to him, her breathing still tense.

He ran a finger through her hair, combing it back from her temple. "How do you feel?" he said.

Chanpen pushed herself up on her elbow and leaned in to him. They often did this—whispered to each other in the dark when they were alone and it wasn't necessary. She paused before speaking and he could smell the fragrant sweetness of longgan on her breath.

"Why doesn't he stay with Kam?" she whispered. "They have so much more space."

Her hints about the house came almost daily now: she wanted to build a larger one, made of hardwood rather than bamboo, with a separate bedroom and a tiled roof. The inadequacy of their house was the very problem he aimed to solve when he agreed to accompany the caravan in the first place. Apai wanted the same things—he'd laid out his plan to Chanpen many times—but it was as if she was worried that if she didn't keep the air saturated with her desires they might be at risk of dissipating away.

She held her face by his ear, waiting for his reply.

Apai understood why the Haw's stern demeanor unnerved Chanpen. Apai could almost already feel the silence from the other side of the room where he would lay during his visits, on his back as rigidly as he stood, staring open-eyed at the pinprick of a star through the hole left by the missing leaf in their fraying thatched roof. Tonight, if he focused his attention on the natural world beyond their porous walls, Apai could hear the static noise of nocturnal insects. Inside their home, however, it was indeed unnervingly silent, as if the thick darkness, or the anticipation of the Haw himself, extinguished all living sound.

In the beginning Apai hoped he could function as an unofficial liaison between the Haw and the men from the city—that he could translate between the desires of the lowlander Thais and the methods of his fellow mountain-dweller. But the Haw had seen more cities than Apai ever would in his own lifetime, and Apai soon came to see that the lowlanders respected the Haw and afforded him a status they would never grant anyone from a Lua village.

Though he had never acknowledged it to Chanpen, Apai found the discomfort of the Haw's presence slightly thrilling. The inaccessible strangeness of his bearing and the unfailing consistency of his actions challenged Apai in a way that nothing in his life in the village ever had. He felt a kinship with the Haw in ways that, even after several years of caravans together, he could not fully express—could not imagine himself trying to express with the inexpressive Haw.

"He is harmless," Apai said, intending to sound reassuring but immediately wondering if he had said it more harshly than he intended.

Chanpen retreated to her side of the mat. "I'm not afraid of harm," she said.

Apai had never shared with Chanpen the extent of the potential dangers the caravan

faced, but it was as if she could sense them. Or that she could sense that he might not come back to her, which she had no concrete reason to expect.

"What then?" he asked. The tokay on the overhead beams began its ostentatious, staccato call.

"I'm afraid of your naivety," she said. "Of your foolishness and of being alone."

He took this to mean that she was worried for his safety. He turned toward her and ran his finger through her hair a second time. In his most soothing tone, he said, "It's hard to be away from the people you love." Her thigh was cool against his palm.

"Hard for whom? Are you talking about yourself, or me?" she said.

"Both of us, I suppose."

"Who else, then, are the 'people' you love? Your parents' spirits? My brother who is jealous of everything you do?"

When she didn't get pregnant after six months of trying, Apai assured Chanpen it was only a matter of patience. Still, she worried and sought advice from her mother and aunts. They gave her small baskets of herbs to pound into a paste, others to drink in a tea. She handed cups of the bitter concoction to Apai, too, first in the morning and then also at night, and he drank when it was offered. He spoke to her of the qualities that he admired in her since before they were married: her seriousness, her empathy, her intelligence. He meant these things. It felt good to say them out loud. But as the months went on with no success, a strange kernel of bitterness grew inside her, as if she had become pregnant not with life, but with doubt and self-recrimination. Her self-blame gave rise to other kinds of blame that Apai felt directed at him—not for their infertility but for his failures in other areas, none of them spoken but assumed on his part until, despite his efforts to provide for her, he felt like he walked through the world with the terrible

burden of a secret that he should be ashamed of if only he could remember what it was.

And then, even as they waited to become pregnant with any kind of child, she admitted that she hoped their baby would be a girl. Gradually, she felt *certain* that it would be a girl. Apai imagined some men would be pleased with such a desire on the part of their wives—it was, of course, the female children who brought prosperity to the household. But it only made him feel distanced and inadequate by implication, as if he needed augmenting or replacing in some way, as if she needed a female presence to be truly close to. Eventually, Chanpen was overcome with her irrational certainty: it would be a girl and there was no suggesting otherwise. And Apai became more afraid that even if he could give her the child they had once wanted with the same feather-light excitement, she might still consider it a failure if that child happened to not be a daughter.

"I don't need to be protected from other men," she said. "If I don't like these trips, it's not because I am afraid for myself." She turned away from him in her normal position for sleep, pulling his arm back over her as she did. She adjusted herself so that her buttocks pressed more firmly into him. They were still cooler than the rest of her body.

Lying there in the dark, it occurred to Apai that there may be another reason the Haw unnerved them: his was a singularly cold, masculine presence. He showed little emotion, negative or positive, behind his thick mustache. His broad shoulders never hunched. He seemed to harden the very spaces he entered. Conversation among the men around the fire became less buoyant when he sat down to eat his meal, even if he took a drink. The pliable surfaces of their home, the walls and floor that, on a normal day, gave way to their weight with a springy softness underfoot, seemed to petrify in his presence. The Haw made no efforts to put the people around him at ease and he made the house, Chanpen said, go cold and hard as stone.

#

Behind the banana tree, when he was sure no one could see him, Apai dug up his lacquered box of savings. Not even Chanpen knew exactly where he buried it for safe keeping. He removed a wad of paper money and a bar of silver bullion, wrapped it in a cloth, and took inventory of the rest, though he had already memorized its contents: even without what he had just removed, after one more trip with the caravan it would be enough to buy land near the creek and build his house, assuming good luck with the items that he planned to carry and sell himself: stick-lac, pangolin scales, and his tiger pelt and bones. Every member of the caravan was allowed to conduct their own trade, so long as they did not overload the mules and they performed their duties respectably along the way.

Apai must have heard the clock-clock of the wooden bell worn by Blue Star, the Haw's lead mule, but it didn't register while he was re-burying his box of savings. It wasn't until he was scattering dried leaves over the spot that he heard an exclamation from Chanpen.

Tied to one of the posts that supported the house, firmly ensconced in the shade, the dun-colored mule stared out from her elaborately beaded and be-mirrored mask with her characteristic haughtiness. Tassels hung from her bridle of braided leather. A single pheasant's feather clung to the top of her head and drooped to the side like a lazy third ear. The Haw had arrived early. He must have startled Chanpen. She would not have had time to steel herself.

The Haw stood erect and silent in front of the door. He turned slowly to face Apai as Apai climbed the steps, reached the small terrace, and greeted his tall visitor with a generous wai. The Haw—his name was Bukang, but no one ever called him anything but "elder" to his face, or "the Haw" when he was not present—replied with a nod. Inside, Chanpen faced them, bent over with a broom, nodding nervously while sweeping an area that she had already swept

twice in the last 24 hours. Apai invited the Haw in, took his leather satchel from his thick grip, and placed it against the wall. As usual, the Haw was not interested in small talk and he made no expression of apology for his early arrival. Apai didn't even bother to ask him if he'd had a comfortable journey to Baan Bo Luang. To the Haw, for whom journeying was something he was born into—an inheritance—the question was irrelevant.

"We're sorry our house is so small," Chanpen said. The tokay projected a high-pitched croak. Chanpen excused herself to get some water.

When she reappeared with two cups and some salted tamarind sweets, Apai felt a rush of pride displace his frustration. She had remembered that the Haw loved tamarind and had somehow managed to find some, despite its being out of season. It must have come from far away—she must have been working on it for some time.

The Haw took a deep drink of his water. He wore his red kufi and the thick woolen multi-colored cloak that he never removed, regardless of the temperature. A breeze blew out the doorway and Apai could smell his sour scent, which struck him as exotic despite the fact that the Haw only lived less than a day's journey away, near Baan Nam Po, and probably ate and drank the same things he did, including the wild boar and rice whiskey they would share that night. Yet the Haw retained the stubborn otherness that went beyond his traditional dress. By never attempting to put his hosts at ease, he was merely embodying his status as permanent, unrepentant stranger in the country of his birth.

When Chanpen offered the tamarind he coolly declined. She took his cup to refill it, walking away with a posture that might have been anxiety or impatience.

The Haw told Apai about his preparations. It would be their largest caravan yet—twelve baskets of salt and fourteen bales of cotton. Stepping out the door before Chanpen returned with

the water, he paused. “And whatever else they bring from the city,” he said. “Speak to me outside?”

They walked a few steps toward the papaya tree and the rows of pineapple plants Apai had planted on the side of the hill.

“You are planning to return with the rest of us, correct?”

Apai nodded, a puzzled look on his face.

“I’m aware that you have some personal obligations in in Laos.”

“Those obligations aren’t a problem,” Apai said. After a moment, he added, “But I haven’t discussed it yet with Chanpen. It would better if you didn’t—”

“Of course, I wouldn’t mention it,” the Haw said.

The papayas had grown long and had turned half orange on the tree. At the Haw’s foot a mature pineapple lay with a gaping hole in its end, hollowed out by a rat.

“I ask because there is reason to think this could be a difficult journey, more so than usual, and we will need your help as much as ever.”

“Difficult?”

“Yes.”

“Rain would slow our progress…”

“The unseasonal weather is troubling, that is true. Also, the Politician is sending three new men—”

“Again? They never bring the same group twice.”

“Three new men along with Aek, Noi, and the Eel.”

There was indeed a strange pressure in the air; far away, farther than they could see but close enough to feel, grey clouds pushed their way toward them.

The Haw continued: “The unrest in Laos has made everything more complicated on both sides of the border mountains. The trail is more dangerous than it has ever been. I’m told the Politician’s men bring the best new guns, but we can’t be sure that they all know how to use them.”

A tinge of embarrassment fanned across Apai’s chest at the thought of his attachment to his old muzzle-loader, which had been his uncle’s. He knew it was a relic that marked him as primitive but he would use no other gun.

“Have you heard anything about the people calling themselves the ‘Border Police?’” Apai asked.

“Just that we should be prepared to police ourselves,” the Haw said, turning back to the house. In the distance Blue Star pulled at her lead, straining to reach the nearest patch of grass. “Same bandits, new name.”

Accompanied by the Haw’s trusted partner, an Iu-Mien named Saeng Liu, the Politician’s six men, all from the provincial capital, arrived that night on mules that the Haw had arranged for them in Pua. An easy journey, almost no walking, but the city men entered the village’s tiny salt-well square like exhausted soldiers returning from a lost battle: dismounting gently, rubbing their aching limbs, furrowing their tired brows. Despite the conscientiousness of the village boys who came to help them unsaddle their mules, the city men admonished them to be careful with the items they had brought to sell themselves. The boys didn’t mind; they were eager to earn something from the men from the city as payment for their assistance—a mirror, a pencil. The baskets of salt the caravan would trade on behalf of the Politician had been assembled that day and were lined up against the salt huts. With the exception of the boys, the rest of the villagers

stayed out of sight, not because they weren't familiar with these visitors, but because they were.

Gradually, the city men reverted to the banter that was their default, poking each other with jokes that only they understood, their voices rising until they shouted to each other across the square, chattering away at the top of their lungs as if they had hardly stopped since the last time they'd been there, six months ago. Their city accents echoed through the cool dry-season air, nearly drowning out the muttering of the stream behind the salt huts. To Apai it sounded like a performance for an audience that consisted entirely of themselves.

"Why don't you ever bring your sister out to help?" Noi, a shortish man with a dark green khaki jacket and hair on his chin, said to one of the village boys, who was about 10. "You have a sister, right?" The boy stared at Noi with wide eyes, his head perfectly still, reluctant to contradict the man by telling him that, in fact, he did not.

"Rice whiskey, then? Something to make my stay here bearable?"

The boy sprinted off in the direction of his house, hoping for another pencil.

The boys unhooked the leather chest harnesses, lifted off the wooden saddles, and stood them on the ground. They peeled off the woolen blankets soaked through with sweat that cushioned the mules' backs and hung them up to dry for the night. Meanwhile, the Haw inspected each mule for signs of sores from ill-fitting saddles. His mules wore the same semi-fixed wooden saddle that the Haw caravanners had always used—it had four curved legs like a stool, designed to minimize pressure on the animal's spine. But care still had to be taken to ensure a proper fit, and the Politician's men were not inclined to pay attention to such things. At any sign of abrasions the Haw rubbed pork fat on the spot to aid healing. He checked their teeth and their hooves and read the whorls in their coats for signs auspicious or troubling. Saeng Liu, who dressed in the loose black garments of the Mien people and whom they called simply Liu,

helped with the shoeing.

Apai had always thought it was strange that the Politician insisted on sending his own men from the capital for the caravan, with the exception of the Haw, Liu, and himself. Liu lived in the Mien village nearest to the Haw's solitary house on the Phu Fa ridge. He had some connection to the Haw that had never been fully explained to Apai. There were Mien villages near Saeng Tong, the Lao village that they traded with, and Apai wondered if perhaps he had helped ensure incident-free passage for the caravan in the beginning. In any case, he was worth three men for the work he did and he clearly held the Haw's unconditional trust.

Like the man they called "Cousin Aek," their leader, the men from the city often seemed to be distantly related to the Politician in some way. In contrast to the Haw and Liu, most of them had no interest in the overland trade business before being assigned to the caravan. Several of them seemed to have never left the provincial capital with the exception of these twice-annual trips. They were fairly ignorant of how to survive in the forest, but hardened and cynical and confident of their ability to survive in the world of men. By now Apai could sense a barely-detectable undercurrent of disdain toward the Politician's men from the Haw, whose Yunannese Muslim ancestors had dominated the overland trading routes for centuries, from the high kingdoms of Tibet to the Red River, to the port cities in southern Burma. Apai had only a vague notion of where those places were, but since he was a child he knew that it was the Jeen Haw who periodically came through with their chestnuts and silver and iron tools. The Haw and Liu were scrupulously neutral in their expression—Liu was even quieter than the Haw; Apai could not remember a spontaneous word he had ever said—but Apai had the sense that the Haw thought of his role in this particular caravan as supervising children, albeit children with expensive firearms. He surely knew from early on that taking this job would require him and

Liu—and, presumably, Apai—to carry a heavier burden than they would have if they were working with more competent men. The payment, clearly, made it worth it for the Haw. And for Apai, too: each return trip of the caravan paid him thirty-five chickens—the equivalent of six months' hard work in the rice fields. That alone was motivation enough.

But for Apai there was something more. Though he was intimately familiar with the forest within a two days' walk in every direction, he rarely traveled for a reason other than hunting. The little travel he had done, however, even if it only ever took him to villages as remote and small as his own, was enough for him to see clearly how his deep familiarity with his fellow villagers brought both comfort and claustrophobia; how the lack of privacy, by keeping him tethered in place, both freed him to worry about other things—how to provide for Chanpen, how to improve their lot—and also bound the parts of himself that he rarely had occasion to express, including a desire to know the world afresh through senses that could so easily be dulled by the repetition of a fixed life. If, at twenty-two, he was too old to go chasing adventure on a whim, the caravan provided a practical excuse.

When the load had been prepared and the mules all inspected and bedded down, the men of the caravan gathered around a fire they built in the salt-well square. Because they did not want to leave their cargo unattended by more than the dogs, they unrolled their sleeping mats in the salt huts for the night on the platforms where the salt-stirrers usually slept, the giant metal bowls still warm over the fireplaces from days of boiling, the salt-crusted baskets hanging from the ceiling like good-luck pendulums. But despite the most comfortable conditions they would enjoy for many days, the men from the city would often only sleep a few hours on the night before the caravan set out from Baan Bo Luang, preferring instead to drink rice whiskey and talk by the fire until nearly dawn.

Listening to them for too long put an unpleasant taste in Apai's mouth. He found their way of talking banal—rather than share old stories about where they came from, origin stories or mysteries of the spirit world, legends of faraway places or tales of skill or courage in a hunt—rather than any of those normal kinds of stories to tell around the fire, if they weren't telling the same tired stories about brothels, the main object of their talk seemed to be to humiliate someone else in the group, usually the person whom they had designated as weakest. That night, that person was Porkball, one of the three new men, nicknamed for his round, spongy body. His hair was shaved to a soft fuzz at the sides; the ample flesh of his cheeks gathered and folded where it met his ears. The dynamic seemed to be complicated, however, by the fact that Porkball was more closely related to the Politician than the rest of them—whereas the others might be "related" in the broad sense that they enjoyed some kind of special patronage relationship with the Politician, Porkball appeared to be truly related by blood. In his loquaciousness he swung from self-deprecation to entitled petulance to the same brand of cruelty the rest of them engaged in, at times even more biting, as if his inexperience led him to misjudge the level of enthusiasm appropriate for the moment. Immediately after one of these quick outbursts, however, recognition would pass across his face like a sudden breeze and he would re-assume his role as good-natured punchline. The other two new men were Dtom, a stocky man who had spent time in the military, and Toom, jovial and grey-haired, better suited to working a noodle cart on a busy road than trekking through the forest.

"Sugar will never survive the…journey if you get any fatter before we leave," said the Eel, who punctuated his speech with long pauses in unexpected places.

"Says the man whose mule is as sickly-looking as he is! Sugar is not only the strongest of the mules, but she's also the prettiest," Porkball said.

"Spoken like a true expert," Aek said. He was younger than most of his subordinates, but sharp and confident. The firelight danced over the sparse whiskers scattered across his chin. Apai found his broad smile disarming, if only because of his fascination with his straight, white teeth.

"An expert in pretty mules!" the Eel said. "How many have you known, young Porkball?"

"I told you he wasn't a virgin," Aek said.

The other men who were new to the group, Toom and Dtom, listened with amusement.

"You wish you saw as much tail as I do, old man!" Porkball said.

"Donkey tail?" Noi said.

"Thai women," Porkball said. "If his daughter wasn't so occupied with other men"—he pointed to the Eel—"I would have already been with her too. It's only a matter of time."

"Be careful," Noi said.

"Of what?" Porkball said. "I haven't even started about his wife. Is it hard to satisfy her now that she's twice your size? If you did, maybe she wouldn't be so hungry all day. Bring her to me—our bodies are more compatible." He pulled up his shirt to expose the broad globe of his belly, which he rubbed in the red light of the fire with a triumphant grin on his face.

"I didn't know love with…a mule could give a boy so much confidence," the Eel said.

"I don't *need* to have sex with a mule, you peasant! I come from one of the richest families in Nan!"

"Yes, yes, we all know each other here," Aek said, diffusing the tension with his tone. "And if we continue to work well together, we will all make ourselves rich—or, I'm sorry, even more rich—eventually."

Porkball smiled a huge, open-mouthed smile and spread out his arms in the Eel's

direction. “Ha! I’m just playing around, friend! You take me too seriously.”

Most of the men were quiet now, either annoyed or embarrassed.

“What’s the point of a trip to the country if we can’t have any fun, right?” Porkball said this to Toom, now, who was the last to keep a polite smile on his face.

“Oh, I’m sure there will be fun, one way or the other,” Aek said.

“As soon as you’re bitten by some spider or snake, we’ll have fun listening to you cry yourself to sleep,” Noi said. He plucked out the meat of a rhinoceros beetle and popped it in his mouth.

Porkball looked taken aback, his face serious again.

“What kind of snakes?” he asked.

Noi spread out his arms. “Just playing around, little friend!” He tossed a beetle shell at Porkball’s feet.

Despite the moments of tension, Porkball and the rest of them seemed to be enjoying themselves. Toom was already drunk. Of the six of them, he was also the only one a person would trust at first glance to be alone with his wife or daughter.

Chanpen had recruited several women from the village to cook that night’s meal: tender ferns and bamboo shoots fried with garlic and a sour, earthy soup of mushrooms gathered from the forest to accompany the roast boar. Toom, Porkball, and the Eel exclaimed with pleasure when she brought out a large wooden platter of the boar, while the others barely grunted in affirmation.

“All the pellets removed?” said Aek, teasing Apai about the last time, when Noi had chipped his tooth on a stray shard of metal still lodged in the meat and, to everyone else’s amusement, bitterly accused Apai of trying to kill him.

"I put extra in for Noi," Apai said, eliciting a laugh from Liu, Toom and several others.

Toward the end of the meal, Noi said to Apai, "It's impressive that you stay so thin, being such a skilled hunter." He emphasized the word *skilled* and Apai could tell it was not an innocent compliment.

"And keeping your own cow in every village," said Dtom. It startled Apai that Dtom, having never met him, knew anything about his life and, further, would be so bold as to share it on the first night in Apai's village. He glanced at the Haw, who had already begun his pipe. But of course, Apai remembered, the Politician's men had had plenty of time to talk on their way to Bo Luang.

During their last caravan to the Khmu village in Laos, Apai had married a second wife. This development had taken his fellow caravanners by surprise and struck them as strange for several reasons that they never ceased to repeat to him on the journey home: he wasn't a rich man; he was Lua, not Khmu; he was shy and rarely spoke about women despite countless opportunities to do so, giving them the impression that he was genuinely, pathetically dedicated to Chanpen. What was the point of having a minor wife so far away, they asked. Move to the city, they said. You can have one for much cheaper and you only have to talk to her for a night.

Apai didn't expect them to understand why he'd done it; he hardly understood it himself. He knew, though, that there was no use talking through it with them. With enough distance on the trail he would recover the quiet, exhilarating sense of mystery that had led him to take an action that both perplexed and buoyed him since.

"A man with that much milk should consider sharing," Noi said, jolting him back to the fire. "It's only polite."

Apai forced out a laugh. The Haw lit his pipe, a detached rhythm to his movement

signaling that he was more interested in the relative dryness and density of his packed tobacco than he was in the banter-as-sport playing out before him. Chanpen emerged again from the shadows into the pool of light cast by the fire. Apai didn't think she'd heard them, but he couldn't be sure.

She moved silently around their circle, collecting their used banana leaves with the same stern expression that she often had around these men. Toom, who was laughing too loudly at everything, attempted politeness but in fact shouted, "Have you eaten yet?"

"I have," she said. A dog had crawled too close to one of the pots; she struck it forcefully with a spoon and it yelped away sideways.

"Delicious," Toom said, in a chastened voice.

As she was carrying away the last bowl, Chanpen turned back to Apai and said, "Will you be walking me back home?"

"In a moment," he said, almost under his breath. There was a brief pause as she moved out of earshot and Apai braced for whatever joke was coming.

As if on cue, Noi said, "Apai comes when he's called. Even to another country."

Ahead in the dark two more of the dogs approached Chanpen and she tossed them bones. Her movements appeared natural and relaxed now. The Haw and Liu had finished their pipes, which was his opening to leave. When he reached the area where the women were cleaning up from their cooking, the others were cold and uncommunicative in response to his offer to help carry what he could, but Chanpen was as cheery as she ever was at that time of night.

"I pity you for having to spend so many days and nights with those fools," she said, smiling, with no hint of bitterness. "I expect they'd starve on the trail without you."

As she stacked pots in his arms he looked closely at her face for a sign of tension or

recognition but in the low light of the embers of the cooking fire she looked as untroubled as the first time he had met her, when she was 16 and had come to his childhood village to visit relatives with her mother. Then, he had found her introversion attractive. Now, he regarded it as an obstacle. Apai wondered what it meant that he found it so difficult to interpret the people who mattered most in his life—if it was because he was destined to be with those kinds of reserved personalities or if it wasn't them at all, but a defect in his own ability to read their hearts.

They moved briskly in single-file, each according to his assigned place. Apai walked behind the Haw, second in line, strangely pleased to be staring at the bright pattern of his thick woolen cloak again. Together with the smell of the damp hides of the mules and the more familiar aroma of the edge of the forest, its fecund red clay and mineral fog, the Haw's scent triggered pleasant memories for Apai. He felt a sense of relief on the first day of their treks, as soon as the village was out of eyeshot and they were fully engulfed by the forest. He took satisfaction in the hang-dog postures of the city men who had spent the night drinking until the first wisps of grey colored the horizon. Because the mules were now so heavily packed, the men from the city bickered over who got to ride the one that had room for a passenger. They showed no deference to Porkball, who sweat profusely at the pace, which the Haw had set at almost a trot. When he eventually monopolized more than half of the riding time, it was out of necessity.

By contrast, walking made Apai feel alive. The settling into the vague ache in his ankles and knees, the pressure on the sides of his feet, on his shoulders where he carried his pack in all of it he felt most deeply the peculiar fragility of being human. And humans *were* fragile—he had seen a man sliced open from hip to neck by a boar's tusks, his ribs exposed to the air. He'd seen the same boar when it was finally taken by a party of hunters looking for revenge, a deep black

mark in its snout from the hole of an old bullet stopped by its thick skull. The boar had gone on living like that, healing and growing strong enough to one day turn and charge and cut open his pursuer. Compared to the creatures we hunt we are soft, vulnerable, jelly-like things, Apai thought. They sewed the man up but failed to properly clean the debris from his wounds and, after a promising first few days, they became swollen and purulent and he died in a hallucination of confused regret over the circumstances that put him on the ground beneath that boar in the first place.

Walking was how he settled into himself—transformed himself, even—a source of self-knowledge and connection with the world. As with hunting, his ability to embrace it without any resistance gave him exceptional patience and persistence, which led to stamina. This talent, he thought, was similar to being good at loving. He sensed that in Boua, the woman he married in Laos, he had found someone more capable of loving than anyone he had ever met, even if she only let him see glimpses of this talent in practice. Perhaps he thought too much, but it seemed to him that, after they made love the first time and he told her about Chanpen, she subtly changed, becoming both more open in a way—more free—but motivated by an almost selfish, angry hunger, walling herself off from the possibility of real love. He wanted to recover that possibility.

The Haw decided when to stop for the night. In setting up camp, everyone had an assigned task, which allowed the evening meal to be prepared efficiently. For the Haw, this meal was infused with a tremendous amount of significance—what others might call superstition. He told them precisely where to make the fire, where to sit, and in what configuration—two rows, pointing in the direction of their destination, with himself and Aek each at the front of one of them—"the head of the dragon." The rest of them sat in order of age. The copper pots were

placed in the middle. In return for their acquiescence to his strict procedures the Haw tolerated the city men's loud talk over dinner and around the fire.

"I thought our tiger-killing guide was going to make us an ant-egg salad tonight," Noi said. "Isn't that one of your special mountain skills—finding ant-eggs?"

"It's not difficult," Apai said.

"Can we see your tiger pelt?" the Eel asked. His curiosity appeared to be genuine. Apai demurred, leaving open the possibility of getting it out the following day.

"All of this," Dtom said, "Used to be part of the kingdom of Nan. That tiger would have belonged to the King of Nan." It was not unusual for people from the provincial capital to speak of the time when their city was the heart of a kingdom. Apai felt no more allegiance to the idea than he did to the king that ruled them now from Bangkok.

"The rice is good," Toom said.

"Why would anyone want to grow rice on a hill?" Noi asked. "Moving to a new spot every few years, having to clear more trees. Don't they know they can do it much more efficiently on flat land?"

"Never mind rice," Dtom said. "Why would a person want to live so far from roads and stores? From electricity?"

"You don't have to ask about 'they'," Aek said, egging him on as much as correcting him. "'They' are right here." He nodded to Apai and Liu.

The Haw had had enough.

"What do you see when you look at a rice field in a valley?" he asked impatiently, to no one in particular and everyone at the same time. "Beauty? Order?"

A few of them nodded hesitatingly. The others pretended he wasn't talking to them.

“It’s good, you think, to make use of land to grow rice where it’s flat. It’s natural, and that’s the natural place where men should live. Yes?”

More of them were paying attention.

“But what is the difference between men and beasts?” he said. “What is the difference between you and these mules? We have free will; they must do our bidding. We are free to go where we wish; they are bound to us by rope and harness. We take as much of their labor as we require and as they can afford to give and still survive. Do you disagree? Noi?”

He did not disagree.

“Now look again, if your circumscribed imaginations will allow, at the vast cultivations of rice surrounding your esteemed home city of Nan, or, even larger as I have heard, Bangkok. Why do you suppose it was so important for the early rulers of your Nan kingdom that its people grew wet rice instead of, say, taro or mangos?”

One of the dogs sidled up against Apai’s leg and he handed him a bit of rice. Apai did not know the answers to the Haw’s questions either, but he enjoyed these rare times when he gave them a look into his vastly traveled mind.

“Because, unlike you, they knew that rice is something they could *read*."

They let this statement pass over their heads.

“Wet rice is good because it can feed so many from such little land,” Dtom said.

“It also takes more people to plant and harvest, which keeps those people nearby, where your kings want them to be.”

“Is it not—pardon me—is it not that rice is easy to transport and store?” Toom said, eager to play some kind of peacemaker.

“Surely you must see that this means it is also easy to take away from those who planted,

tended, and harvested it in the first place?" the Haw said.

"What do you mean," Porkball said, "'easy to read'?" Apai was impressed that he had been following along at all.

"What makes you think it is so beautiful—that it all glows yellow at the same season of the year—also makes it legible. It may be impossible to know how many potatoes are in the ground, and thus difficult to know much to tax. Rice announces itself to anyone who walks by: when it will be ready and how much it will yield. The tax collector only needs to show up in the right week, or month."

Apai could not help comparing this notion to their caravan, which, quite purposefully, never announced its route or scheduled time of arrival.

"You are so proud of your lowland culture," the Haw said, almost mockingly now. "Thailand: Land of the Free. You think your way is the normal way to live, and we are savages." Even Aek lowered his head now at the Haw's momentum. "The problem for your kings was that they could control only as far as their oxen could carry their grain. Their people, if they wanted to, could walk farther. Why would I want to be closer to a palace—its police and taxes. Forced labor. For people like me, wet rice represents the opposite of freedom."

Toom nodded like an enamored schoolboy. The Eel and Porkball, too, were impressed but also, like the others, fairly chastened. They were essentially silent until the Haw finished his pipe and retired.

"Don't let this rice go to waste," Apai said, dropping the bowl in front of Noi. "It took some work to grow it on a hill."

At the fire the next night, they continued a debate about which path to take. The city men

wanted to go the shortest route. This would take them over what Apai called the "high road," which included a stretch of narrow trail that, for a short but significant distance, clung to the side of a sheer limestone cliff. Though the high road would save them more than a day and a half of walking, Apai expressed his preference for the flatter, safer "low road" through the valley that circumscribed that particularly imposing ridge. In the past the Haw accepted his advice almost without question. This time, however, both the Haw and Aek remained silent while the lower-ranking city men complained about the proposal.

"How do we know there aren't problems with the low road?" Noi asked, waiving his arm in the air like a general. "Besides the leeches and mosquitos that will bleed us dry, that is." Several of the others made noises of agreement.

"Last year, we vowed never…to take that road again," said the Eel.

"You make that vow every year," Apai said, "and yet you continue to come back. Besides, mosquitos must eat too."

What Apai didn't say was that the same problem that made him concerned for the integrity of the high road had also made the mosquitos worse in the valley. The last few months had been unseasonably wet. He expected the high path to have suffered some erosion. If there had been a complete washout they would have to turn back. He worried that it wasn't worth the risk to save a day and half. To make matters worse, despite the clear sky Apai thought it might rain before they reached the high pass along the cliffs and he found it difficult to see how the newer, more skittish mules could navigate the section where a small waterfall disappears in the dry season but makes the trail slippery at the first drops of precipitation.

"Have we brought enough rice for the longer journey? Toom asked. "Porkball will get grumpy."

“We have our rifles,” Apai said.

“So much extra walking because of caution,” Noi said. “And descending into the valley and climbing back out. We ran steadily next to our mules on that low path last time and it took us almost two days extra.”

“If that’s what you call running,” Aek said, “I don’t want to see what it looks like when you take your time.”

Apai was surprised that the Haw continued to leave him alone to advocate for his opinion for so long. Apai had done his job as local guide in making a recommendation; it was the Haw’s job to make a decision. The caravan was not a democracy. But the Haw remained uncharacteristically uncommitted. Instead, Aek spoke up:

“The effort doesn’t matter,” he said. “But the time does. If Apai is right and it rains, we could have a bigger problem crossing the river. We need to save time where we can.” He was looking directly at the Haw as he spoke. The Haw listened while twisting a stick in the fire.

To Apai’s surprise, the Haw stood up and nodded.

“It will save us a day,” he said.

Liu had already laid down on his mat next to the saddles and rolled away from the fire to fall asleep, as if he knew what was in store.

Under a day and a half of rain they had trudged single file on the trail, ascending rapidly into the high mountains that separated Nan from Laos, the smell of the path coming awake as it saturated into mud, so pungent it almost smelled like dung. Apai had grown up with the smell, took comfort in it even, just as he found the smell of actual cow dung comforting. For his companions from the city, it was yet another thing to resent about this landscape. They had been

silent for most of the day, sullen and incredulous at the weather, their coats soaked through and the air growing colder with altitude. Such rains were not usually to be expected in the dry season. For Apai, however, the rain was not a surprise—any child could see the ants making haste in their own caravans across the forest floor, the birds distressed but purposeful in their precautions. The Haw, of course, betrayed no dissatisfaction with the weather in his posture or gait, but as his kufi became saturated with rainwater its crimson dye began to run down the back of his neck, staining the collar of his white under-robe.

As the slope became steeper and the trail moved off the ridgeline to hug the side of the mountains, narrowing and with a drop-off that became more precipitous, Apai found himself dwelling on what *had* surprised him: the Haw's assenting to the desire of the city men to take the high road despite Apai's advice against it. That had never happened before, and because Apai refused to believe that the Haw had lost any faith in his abilities as guide, it signaled for him some new circumstance, some urgency, that Apai could not guess at. The Haw tended to discourage discussion of the ever-present danger from bandits, though he knew as well as anyone the risks from all sides: the Kuomintang had been charging their "transport tax" on all opium crossing borders in the region and, through this smaller caravan that stuck to a more southerly, less common route, the Politician in the provincial capital was able to avoid it. For the last several years, however, things had become more complicated: as the communist Pathet Lao pushed the Royal Lao army further west, and as Thai police became more active in patrolling—some would say controlling for their own profit—the border, one never knew who one might encounter on these mountain trails. This was to say nothing of the white foreigners recruiting Hmong, Lahu, and Mien for their "secret armies." Until as recently as a decade ago, these trails were quiet. The border barely existed in the imagination of Apai or his fellow villagers or any of

the dozens of other kinds people who lived in these hills—they were no more "Thai" or "Lao" than they were French.

The villagers of Saeng Tong with whom they traded were among the rare Khmu who lived at a high enough altitude to grow poppies and who were willing to take the risks associated with growing them. Their former headman, Boua's father, was a calculated risk-taker. As much as he might wish it to be otherwise, Apai did not consider himself a risk-taker. Among all of the ethnicities in those mountains, divorce was most easily accepted among his own people, and infertility was the most common reason for it. And yet he had no desire to divorce Chanpen. Others may have thought him a coward—he could sense it in the way they spoke to him—but for years he clung to the hope that they would one day have children, and, if they didn't, their bond would be enough to sustain them into old age. Besides, who was to say that their infertility was Chanpen's fault, and not his? Still, he felt a nagging inclination to wonder if it wasn't simply fear that kept him from changing that part of his life.

And so, when he saw upon entering Saeng Tong nearly six months ago that Boua was pregnant from his previous visit, a part of him was unequivocally proud that he could make a child. It restored something in him—somehow, it lifted the weight he'd been carrying, rather than adding to it. He didn't feel guilty—he held an irrational belief that the complicated situation would work out. At the time he wasn't thinking of the baby as a possible way to fill the hole in his shared life with Chanpen, but perhaps he sensed that it could fill a hole in his own, which might be better than nothing at all.

The rain had subsided and his ears were still adjusting to the relative quiet when Blue Star stopped abruptly while turning a corner and shook her head toward the wall of stone to their

right. To the left, the path dropped off so steeply that the tops of tall trees, thick and rustling, created the illusion of a surface far below, though it was much farther than that to solid ground. Ahead of them it passed into a concave section of the cliff where it narrowed to the thickness of six hooves. A trickle of water dripped over the overhang and the path itself was visibly slick.

The Haw moved slowly but deliberately across the stretch of narrow ledge, his soft leather shoes gripping the smooth-worn earth. Every few steps he paused to nudge a part of the edge with his left foot to check it for stability. He kept his tall, straight posture, running one hand against the side of the rock wall. He seemed to see the path without looking down at it. Then he came back.

In a low, soft voice, he reassured Blue Star, stroking her behind her ear a few times and then pulling gently but firmly on her lead. The Haw had made her lead mule for a reason: she was smart and aware of her surroundings but also brave and, above all else, unfailingly obedient. He turned his back to her and started across again. She did not need much coaxing to follow him, but she tensed as she approached the narrow ledge. The burlap sacks at her side scraped against the cliff wall. She let out a snort. It seemed that if she took too deep of a breath her side would push her away from the wall and out over the precipice. Occasionally the Haw would look back and give her an encouraging word. The packs were more unwieldy on the way out than on the return; Apai worried about something getting stuck on a protruding root or rock. When she was halfway across, the Haw called for Apai to start the next one. It would be easier for them if each were following another.

Apai had felt Namwan, the mule assigned to him, tightening as she watched her leader make her slow, nervous way across the ledge. He tried to imitate the Haw's comforting gestures by putting his hand on her neck where he had seen the Haw do it and attempting the same low,

comforting tenor of voice that he had heard the Haw use, but he was not the Haw, who had a lifetime of experience with these animals. They didn't use mules in Apai's village, or any that he knew of—the only time anyone saw a mule in that part of the world was when a Jeen Haw caravan passed through. Still, unlike the men from the city, Apai felt it was his obligation to learn, so he kept humming, kept trying to stroke Namwan's mane even through it only seemed to make her more anxious. She waited for Blue Star to reach safety. Apai declined to push. The Haw came back to them, less haltingly than before. He was already used to the ledge.

"She's nervous," Apai said.

"They all are. It's contagious," the Haw said. "A problem that comes with being smarter than the rest of us."

"I tried to soothe her, but—"

"We need to move them in sync. Bravery is contagious too."

The Haw stood directly in front of the mule and let her calm down and focus on the pattern of his coat. When her breathing had returned to normal, he reached both hands up to hold the flesh at the back of her jaw, behind her ears. She became still. No one Apai knew would stand in front of a nervous mule when one stubborn outburst could send him over that edge.

The Haw said something to Liu in the Mien language, and Liu communicated to the other men in city Thai: they were to take their animals' leads and walk them together, not more than two lengths apart, across the ledge. Noi, who had been most vociferous in his insistence on taking this higher road, was the first to grumble.

By the time the Haw finished speaking to Namwan she seemed almost eager to follow him across the ledge. Apai followed—masking his fear, he hoped—with Aek leading his mule behind him. The Eel, Dtom, and Toom all followed without incident, leaving only Noi, Porkball,

Liu, and four mules to cross.

In hindsight Liu should have tied the spare mule to his own, the second-best trained and the one that usually brought up the rear, but the path was narrow even before the ledge and Liu didn't want the trouble of moving the mules around each other, so he simply tied the spare to Sugar, Porkball's mule, directly in front of it.

Robbed of his usual incessant chatter, Porkball stood frozen, looking chastised before the narrow ledge. His knees bent in halting, involuntary jerks. He pawed the side of the mountain, wiped his hands on his shirt, pawed it again.

"This was a bad plan," he said. "He should have never let us come this way." His voice had raised a register and echoed across the cave-like indentation in the wall, so that Apai could hear it clearly where he was on the other side, even over the trickle of water above them. Aek said nothing, but scoffed under his breath.

Porkball took a half step forward, then retreated.

"This is crazy," Porkball said, turning toward the direction from which they'd come. Liu stared at him, not without pity. Noi looked equal parts embarrassed and annoyed, and maybe a little frightened himself. Mirroring Porkball's movements, Sugar, too, turned its head to look behind it, its nose suspended over the edge.

"This is why…it pays to be skinny!" shouted the Eel from where they had successfully crossed. No one on Porkball's side of the ledge was laughing.

"That's enough," Aek said. "Shut your mouth."

Porkball swore a jumbled stream of nonsense. Stepping onto where the ledge began to thin, he gripped Sugar's lead tight with his left hand, digging his nails into any crevice he could find in the dirt and stone to his right. Sugar followed with eyes as wide and glassy as Porkball's.

After a few steps the lead connecting Sugar to the spare mule pulled taught and she followed too, looking less anxious, unencumbered by the bulk the rest of them were carrying. Apai heard Porkball say something about a mother.

Halfway across, Porkball froze again. He turned his head toward the mountain, looking behind him in his peripheral vision and seeing, presumably, that he was beyond the point of return. He lips trembled; his cheeks shook. His knees twitched again, betraying an impractical but terrified part of himself that wanted to override everything else and bring him to a seated position on that ledge from which it would be very difficult to get up.

"I can't do it," he said.

The Haw had not been paying attention to Porkball's troubles up to this point, conversing a few steps ahead on the path with Aek while repositioning his mule's load for the rest of the journey. At Porkball's latest exclamation, he turned.

"Stop crying! Find your dick!" Aek yelled. It wasn't meant to be funny. It also wasn't clear that Porkball heard him in his condition. The mules had stopped too; Sugar leaned slightly back on the rope Porkball still held, pulling it taught in his hand. The spare mule behind Sugar remained unfazed. Noi, perhaps not aware of the severity of the situation ahead of him, nudged the spare mule in the rear, prompting her to edge into Sugar's space.

The Haw was rushing out to Porkball now, a spare length of rope in his hand. Startled by the spare mule's activity behind her, Sugar brayed and took a frightened, jerking step forward. As soon as she did, something shifted—it looked to Apai as if her pack had jolted back and up off her several inches, defying gravity. She brayed again, struggled as if with an invisible ghost in front of her, and then rocks fell toward the canopy as her back left leg slipped off the edge and her back right buckled at an unnatural angle. Her pack had indeed lifted off her—stuck on

something on the wall, it pulled away from her body and the crupper slipped up off her rump. She hung by the chest harness alone, held up by a single straining strap that caught under her neck. Porkball's arm yanked back with the rope when she slipped but he let go without being pulled off balance and now he stood gobsmacked, still frozen but no longer whining, jolted out of his fear and into the visceral spectacle of Sugar frantically trying to get her hind leg back on the path but unable, because her other one was clearly broken and could support no weight. With her haunches on the dirt, struggling in vain to right herself, her braying sounded more like panicked breathing now, the quiet intensity of a living thing facing death. The spare mule stood where she was, connected to Sugar by her lead.

"Cut it!" the Haw said. "Cut the lead!" Noi was closest but he had backed off the ledge onto safer ground. "Cut the damned lead!"

Liu held the rear mule steady and looked at Noi with imploring eyes. Porkball stood like a fat statue on the side of the cliff, his right arm still raised in the position where he had released the lead, pointing toward his struggling animal. Noi stood impassively where he was, taking a step back rather than forward and sidling himself safely between the mountain and the remaining animals.

Liu struggled to get past Noi and the mules to reach the ledge. Meanwhile, on Apai's side, the Haw came back for something, looking right through him as Apai pressed against the mountain to let him past. He didn't want to be a mere spectator but he also felt small and unsure of what to do—should he rush out on the ledge to assist Sugar in some way? He would not be able to get past Porkball. He was about to call to the boy—he looked boyish now—to try to get through to him, when the Haw returned with rifle in hand.

Behind the spare mule, Liu leaned out over the edge to see if he could reach around to the

lead that connected her to Sugar, but he couldn't, so he put a foot up on the rock wall and a hand on the mule's rump and lifted himself up on to her. The sum of his movements didn't register with Apai until after it was all over—that he had rushed forward to tie himself, along with the spare, to Sugar's last desperate moments. By all rights Sugar should have gone over and taken the spare mule and Mien with her. Did Liu let himself imagine, even in a remote corner of his mind, what it would have felt like to ride that mule headfirst off the cliff into the canopy below? In a swift motion he reached forward and, with several vigorous strokes of his long knife, cut her lead.

At the cool nudge of the side of the barrel of the Haw's rifle against his ear, Porkball dropped his arm. The Haw aimed at the broken mule, her cargo still caught on the wall, her harness straining but still helping to hold her up.

"I can cut it," Liu said, sliding forward off his mount, the spare bowing her head low to accommodate him as if she had trained for this very situation. "A shot will spook them all."

To Apai it sounded as if the crack of the rifle came from the distance, perhaps the next highest ridge across the narrow valley, though this was of course another trick of the echo from that concave space in the cliff. Sugar went slack and just as quickly her pack released from its snag and went twirling with her toward the dark green foliage below. A puff of smoke lingered above Porkball's left ear.

Remarkably, the other mules held their ground. The Haw took Porkball by the hand and led him across the remaining stretch of the ledge. As soon as they reached the wider section of the path Porkball collapsed, holding his left ear as if it had been cut off, rocking back and forth. After Liu coaxed the spare mule across to safety and Noi followed without his own animal, Apai stepped over Porkball to go back out on to the ledge and bring it across.

A burning shame welled up in him as he reached the spot where Porkball had stopped and the Haw had shot the injured mule—he had been no better than the city men by watching dumbfounded as the Haw and Mien took unhesitating action. It disturbed him that he had been no more use than The Eel or, worse, Porkball.

Reaching Noi's mule, however, his heart lightened slightly, because at least he hadn't revealed himself to be worse than overwhelmed: calculatedly self-serving. He'd seen Noi's eyes—they communicated not so much fear, but disdain. I'm no fool, he seemed to say.

It didn't occur to Apai until later that the Haw and Liu might be motivated by the same thing the rest of them were and that their willingness to act wasn't bravery, necessarily, but economic urgency. Meanwhile, a large share of Porkball's investment had gone over the ledge with his mule. Now that he'd stopped crying, he'd begun to assign blame, first with tentative whimpers and then rising to a bolder yammering.

"He's supposed to tell us what the trail is like," he said, referring to Apai. "What's the point of having a local guide if he costs us a mule and his load?"

The Haw wouldn't let the goods go unrecovered, Apai knew—there would be an arduous detour that would cost them as much time as it would have taken to follow the low road in the first place. The rest of them let Porkball talk. He was saving face, but the implication disturbed Apai: that despite his clear advice the city men would blame him for this disaster in some way.

"I shouldn't have to pay for his mistakes," Porkball whined. "My ear is still ringing."

Apai could have left the young man to stew in his humiliation. Instead, like a glutton for punishment, he approached him that evening at camp and offered him a ripe fig from a handful he had picked. Porkball sat by himself, his rifle laying across his lap, absent-mindedly clicking

the slide open and letting it snap shut, over and over, as if Apai wasn't there. Apai placed a fig on the young man's cartridge.

"Elephants think they are delicious," Apai said. Porkball ignored it. After a while, Apai said, "When I was young, ten or eleven, my friends and I went to the forest to hunt for birds. We climbed high in trees to spread resin near their nests—it was easier to collect them that way, stuck to a branch, than to kill them with our traps or slingshots.

"So what?" Porkball said.

"So one of our group, a boy we sometimes called Barking Deer, would complain about these trips. He said it wasn't right to catch birds that way, that eventually we would anger the spirit of the mountain."

"And you believe in a spirit of the mountain?"

"Of course. I did and I do. And all the other spirits. But at the time, we ridiculed Barking Deer. We said he was only so considerate of spirits because he was afraid to climb too high in the trees."

"I don't need a parable from a mountain primitive."

"No, you don't. Would you like me to go away?"

Porkball stopped clicking his slide and picked up the fig.

"How do you know these aren't poisonous?" he asked.

Because of the story I am telling you."

"Go on."

"Even though we made fun of Barking Deer, he always came with us anyway, because we were all good friends, or because he had no other friends. We believed our teasing was natural, something all boys do."

"It *is* something all boys do."

"I don't know. Perhaps. But if things were reversed, if the rest of us were like Barking Deer, I don't think anyone would have been teased like that. I think we would have found other kinds of fun.

But we weren't, and he insisted he wasn't afraid, so it was easy to pressure him into climbing the tallest, smoothest, most difficult trees. We barely stifled our laughter as his movements slowed to nearly a full stop at a certain distance off the ground. You could see from below his arms and legs hugging the tree like it was his mother."

"A fig tree?" Porkball was growing impatient and perhaps embarrassed by the implicit comparison. Noi and Dtom were arranging wood for the fire and noticed the two of them talking, Porkball hunched forward, listening to the Lua. Noi said something to Dtom that Apai couldn't hear.

"No, a cashew tree. As tall as any you've seen. We told him to put the resin on a dizzyingly high branch with a long knot in it that we told him served as a birds' nest. We laughed until, trying to prove himself to us, he reached to the branch—"

"And he slipped and fell?"

"He didn't slip, not on his own. He did exactly what we told him to do. Rather than a bird's nest, though, that knot in the branch held a hive of bees. My cousin had shown it to me when he was hunting for honey. When Barking Deer reached his hand into the hollow, they swarmed."

"Get off your ass, Porkball, and finish your tasks," Noi called from where he attempted to light the fire. Porkball responded with an annoyed noise and a face like he'd eaten something sour.

“Well? What happened?” he said.

“He fell. I don’t know if the branch he hit on the way down saved his life or made it worse. He was unconscious but alive, bleeding from one of his ears.”

“He woke up?”

“Yes, but not before one of us, a boy named Mote, ran back to the village for help while my other friend and I stayed with him. When he woke we tried to carry him as far as we could, but even his skinny weight was too much. We sat down where we were and waited for help to arrive.”

Porkball split open the fig with his thumb and pulled its flesh apart.

“How far from the village?” he asked.

“Thirty minutes, no more. But no one came.”

Porkball stopped eating, his eyebrows raised.

“The first person our friend saw when he reached the village was Barking Deer’s father. He got scared. He thought Barking Deer might be dead and he didn’t want to be the one to tell him.”

“He left you there?”

“He was scared. I understand now. At the time, I believed that Barking Deer’s predictions had come to pass—the spirit of the mountain had put a tiger in our friend’s path, and we would be next.”

“But you are the tiger killer!” Porkball’s usual playfulness was coming back to his voice.

“That is another story,” Apai said. “We had no food and only one slingshot, so I left my friend with Barking Deer and went alone into the forest to find something to eat. I have never never been so frightened.”

Aek came to the clearing where they had started the fire and yelled, “Porkball, will you bring us water or are you afraid of the nibbling fish?”

“The Haw is angry with me,” Porkball said. “I’m sure Liu is too. The others despise me for making us look weak.”

“I’ll help with the water,” Apai said. “We can finish the story while we walk.” They each grabbed two long bamboo containers.

As they made their way to the stream, Porkball asked, “So what did you do?”

“What we’re doing now—I found the nearest stream. It was shallow. In the middle of it, from a mound in a still section, came the occasional soft thud of ripe figs falling from an old tree that had grown up there. I took off my shirt and filled it with ripe fruit until I thought it might tear. We were young and too easily excited, but when I lay the pile of figs before the other two boys I thought they would cry, because we knew we would survive there as long as necessary. In the end we didn’t even have to last a night—little Mote burst into tears when my father visited his home to ask if he knew why we hadn’t come home yet. They came searching for us with torches. They found us huddling together next to a mound of fig skins.”

“And Barking Deer?”

“He has seven children. Now they call him Thirsty Bull.”

Porkball looked at Apai to see if the last part about the nickname was true, the same mixture of cruelty and innocence on his face that Porkball had flaunted before his chastening incident on the cliff. Apai took this as a good sign.

“You will be seeing your child,” Porkball said. “Do you hope it will be a boy?”

“I hope I will know if it is my child,” Apai said. Then, with an instant pang of regret, “I am joking. I hope only that they are healthy and happy. That is the truth.”

“Some say you care more about your personal attachments in Saeng Tong than about your allegiance to the caravan.”

They were nearing camp. Noi and Aek stood staring at their approach, Aek’s arms akimbo, both of them looking cynically amused at this unexpected cooperation between Porkball and the Lua.

“More than that,” Aek said, still shouting from a distance. “Fill the pots and make another trip. Apai, you can help Dtom gather more wood.”

“I would like to be a father someday,” Porkball said. “I would give them the best of everything.”

“It is common to be afraid of heights,” Apai said, handing over his empty water containers. We do what we can with what we are given.”

“Is she beautiful?” Porkball asked.

“Who?”

“Your wife—your second wife in Laos. I can’t imagine a mountain woman being beautiful.”

“When you have children,” Apai said, playfully pinching the young man’s arm, “do not give them your imagination.”

II

The afternoon sun lit up the thatched roofs of Saeng Tong, the Khmu village, as they approached from the west. From the opposite ridge they could see the bare bodies of children moving in the village’s central, bald patch of earth. On the slopes above, women in broad hats

tended the fields, up to their chests in the white and pink blooms of poppies. As the men drew closer the women straightened their backs stiffly and peered in their direction. The caravan stopped by the communal barns, outside the ceremonial gate, to wait for the headman to greet them—a courtesy the Haw insisted on after an earlier instance when the city men walked directly into the village on a day that was taboo and they had to barter for a pig to slaughter as a mollifying sacrifice to the spirit of the village. This was how Apai met Boua for the first time—together they served as interlocutors between her father, Ta Tiang, who served both the village headman and its shaman at the time, and the men from the city, who had little patience for the superstitions of the Khmu with whom they had come to trade.

The new headman—not Ta Tiang anymore—was quick to greet them and lead them to the common house where the caravan would sleep. The children had mostly disappeared, peering now from behind windows and doorways. As the headman pointed out the ready piles of wood and bamboo containers of water prepared for his companions, Apai could see Boua in the distance in front of her father's house, standing apart, unwilling to approach him or even smile in front of the rest of the caravan. Apai made a deliberate attempt to slow himself down, to appear not to rush as he unsaddled Namwan, though he wanted to leave his mule where she was and walk straight to Boua.

"She's waiting," said the Eel, after a long drink of water. "You have a job to do."

Unlike some of her fellow villagers, Boua gave no indication that she deferred to the city men in any way or, despite the distance she kept now, that she was was afraid of them. Her hair was tied back in a cloth. Cradled in another length of fabric slung across a single shoulder was a bundle that Apai assumed was his child.

After pausing for what he hoped would appear to the other men to be an adequate amount

of time, he walked to her. He was taken aback by the physical symptoms of his excitement and nervousness—his legs felt unstable, his heart beat irregularly in his ears. When he was close enough to give them some privacy by blocking the others' view of them, she smiled her handsome smile, the creases at the side of her mouth pressed out toward her angular jaw. Beads of perspiration dotted her forehead and her nose. The baby's ample cheek protruded over its sling like a polished brass bowl. He put his hand on Boua's arm and leaned in close to see the child. As he did, Boua let him rest his forehead on hers.

"Meet Little Bear," she said. "Your daughter."

"Little Bear," he said, touching the baby's chin. He looked at Boua for permission to hold her. His palms were as moist as the flesh of a melon.

"Don't worry," she said. "You can't wake her up. I called her Little Bear because she's strong and she sleeps more deeply than any baby I have ever known."

Apai scooped Little Bear out of her mother's sling and held her to his chest. Her nostrils, more perfectly formed than the petals of an orchid, flared even in sleep. He wondered if she would react to his ripe odor but she only hummed a gummy masticating sound, as if she were dreaming of feeding. Apai brimmed with affection for the stout little girl and broke into a huge smile when he looked up at Boua again. He mimicked Little Bear's dream-sounds and leaned over to whisper in Boua's ear. What exactly he wanted to say he wasn't sure—that he had missed her or that their baby was even more beautiful than he had imagined or that he had forgotten how she smelled of smoke and garlic and agarwood. Instead, he simply let his nose linger on the dusty softness of her face until the baby passed gas in between them and Boua smiled again.

"Have you had enough rice to feed everyone?" Apai asked.

"We traded the silver you left last time for more than enough," she said. "My father has

not been eating much, as you will see."

It was dark inside the house. Light and the moist mountain air came in through two small windows on opposite walls. Ta Tiang lay with his back propped up in a dim corner where they made his bed. His entire torso was ribcage. The deep valleys of his chest, exposed by his open shirt, slowly rose and fell. Here and there small polyps lay under his taught skin and, in the band of afternoon light that ran across his figure, the irregular contours of his abdomen were more pronounced. His feet were covered in blankets, though Apai was still sweating through his shirt. Not a thing adorned the wall above him. Boua approached him and put her hand on his shoulder to wake him up.

"Father, we have a visitor."

He woke slowly, as if he was still dreaming with his eyes open. Apai sat on the floor with his feet tucked underneath him and bent forward in a slow, deep wai. Still only half looking at him, Ta Tiang raised his shaking hands to his stomach and pressed them together to receive the gesture.

When Apai first came to the Khmu village, if Ta Tiang asked one of his clan to assist the caravan by bringing water to the animals or preparing a meal they did so unquestioningly, not only out of a sense of hospitality but out of respect for Ta Tiang. It seemed to Apai that with his status in the village and Boua's fierce intelligence and skill, it would have been easy for her to find a second husband after her first one disappeared. Apai felt sure it wasn't his promise of financial support that swayed Ta Tiang. Indeed, by village standards Boua and her father were more comfortable than average, and he would have expected that she could marry most anyone she wanted to, in any village within two days walk. When they were married six months ago, it took him hours merely to convince her to take his gift of the extra silver he wanted to include

with her bride price. In retrospect her father had already begun his decline, but he helped her come to her senses, pointing out that it was bad luck not to accept a gift sincerely given.

Still, it surprised Apai when Ta Tiang consented almost immediately to Apai's proposal. He had told Boua about Chanpen; he assumed she told her father in turn. If Apai had joined the household after marriage as was tradition it may have been a comfort to Ta Tiang in some ways, but Boua had made it clear to her father that this was not going to happen and the old man never indicated that he expected Apai to live with them. In truth, it wasn't clear to Apai that Boua would *want* him to live with them. She could be unpredictable in discussing matters of the heart and, as far as Apai could tell, deeply averse to any expression of neediness. Her father respected her wishes, even if he worried that she was making a mistake, even if he was mildly embarrassed at the unconventional arrangement.

Because it was her second marriage they held the small ceremony in her home, with only Ta Tiang and the village priest present. There were moments that day when Apai thought of the day of his marriage to Chanpen, but because everything was so different—the language, the customs, even the environment around Saeng Tong, which felt supernaturally crowded to him somehow, saturated with older, more capricious spirits—he was able to put the experience in its own basket, as if it belonged to another life. It was as if, in crossing the palm-tingling ledge of the high path or the malaria-soaked humidity of the long valley, he passed through an invisible gate where he kept his physical form but his inner self was replaced by a wiser version that accepted and embodied all of the risk, pain, and imperfections of the wider world beyond Bo Luang.

Yet the question still lingered: if Boua didn't want his money and she didn't want him to stay with her there, what did she want? In moments of uncertainty or transition—while making a

trip toward her after being away from her for a long time, as he had just done—he questioned the simple explanation she had given him from the beginning: that she didn't choose her feelings for him. That they had simply happened and she approached that inconvenient fact with a clear-eyed realism and a refusal to deny its existence. She took her fill of him and endured the heart-hunger in between with no sense of blame.

"Was the journey comfortable?" Ta Tiang asked. He mustered what strength he could to raise himself farther up the wall where he lay. Apai did not mention the lost mule. When the old man reached down to straighten the blanket, the protrusion of some growth on the side of his neck caught Apai's eye like a bauble hanging from a woman's ear.

"There is a problem," Ta Tiang said.

He went on to describe what was happening to the north and east: the Pathet Lao were shrinking the territory held by the royalists more rapidly than anyone had expected, pushing them in their direction. To the north, the KMT had grown increasingly more aggressive in their banditry. They were carving out their own little kingdom.

"The war has been good for trade," he said. "Soon, it will not be." He spoke of opium-growing villages two ridges over in the east that had already had their stores of raw opium, together with livestock and grain, confiscated. By whom, it was still not clear.

Apai had the unsettling impression that his marriage to Boua was not the only reason Tiang was sharing this information with him. In the past, Tiang would have communicated important news to the Haw directly. Perhaps, Apai thought, the Khmu were growing unsure of whom to trust.

"It is three days' walk from those Hmong villages to here. The bandits do not always merely steal," he said. Villages are becoming suspicious of each other, when before we would

help each other, Lua or Lamet or Khmu. The rules are changing."

His son lived in a village two days' walk to the east. Apai wondered if that was how Tiang knew about these stories, and if his son's family was unharmed.

Boua had been sitting some distance from them, feeding Little Bear. Little Bear made a gurgling sound that sounded like an attempt at throat singing, followed by the distinctive, gummy music of her humming.

"She does that when she's happy," Boua said.

"You have to be careful," Tiang said. "And you should not stay here long. Tell your men they will be safer when they make it back to the other side of the border.

Apai trusted the old man. Boua, however, did not seem as gravely concerned as her father.

"He's weaker than I expected," Apai said. "It happened so fast."

"A growth," she said.

"I saw it."

She adjusted Little Bear. The baby gave her a new way to conceal her thoughts and emotions—something else to turn her attention to in the middle of a conversation.

"He says we should leave quickly, that there has been some trouble," he said.

"I heard it." After a pause, she said, "Every morning for the last week, he has been asking if you arrived yet."

"Is he of sound mind?"

"As ever. But I have never seen him so obsessed. Or scared."

"Scared for our caravan? Or his own health?"

"For the village," she said. "He's worried the new headman isn't preparing us."

"What can you do to prepare?"

"After you take the opium with you? We can hide our valuables and move." Her face as she said this conveyed no more stress than if she had announced that she needed to clean the baby's bottom. If she was worried for the wellbeing of herself, Little Bear, and her father, she wasn't showing it. Apai knew the honorable thing would be to offer to stay, but he was already thinking ahead to the conversation he would need to have with the Haw, and the one they had outside his house in Bo Luang.

It would be costly to Apai but he could reimburse the caravan for his absence with the extra money he made for the personal items he had brought to trade, assuming that exchange went as hoped. They sat in silence for what was only a minute or so but felt much longer to Apai as he turned over possibilities in his head. In a brief succession of what-ifs he went from seeing no good option to fully embracing his own conviction that he should stay with Boua and Little Bear until he was sure they were safe.

As he considered such a scenario he also became excited at the possibility that his commitment to stay with them for longer than a few days would pry open something in Boua that he had only briefly glimpsed before: a full surrender to vulnerability, the kind of naked emotional need that she had only shown him in the most intense moments of sexual intimacy. Now he started to imagine what it would feel like if whatever cracked open in those moments stayed that way a bit longer, even during mundane stretches of an average day, and allowed them to experience more of the closeness called for by the inner forces that attracted them to each other but that circumstances prevented her from embracing.

They had recognized in each other a restlessness, a desire to see and do and feel more than they would if they never left their villages. At the same time, he often felt like a fraud

because he knew this was only one half of it for him—the other half wanted to be as settled as Chanpen did, though he sometimes fantasized about settling here, not back in Baan Bo Luang. He felt like he had misled Boua by giving her the impression that he didn't want to own her.

Her father told her she was the only woman he had ever met who did not want to be properly married with a husband in the house. She replied that she strongly doubted this; she was merely the only woman he knew who was honest with him. And bedsides, she said, she had already done it that way, once before.

She was the youngest surviving daughter of her father. Both of her brothers had moved to other villages to live with their wives' families. Her first mother died in childbirth, her second mother from diarrhea from drinking too much water. The village had no shaman at that time—the nearest was a day's walk away—so that was the time when Ta Tiang decided to learn about the spirits and how to appease them and, if need be, compel them to leave a village, a home, a person's body. It was not a little ironic that he was dying now from a foreign object inhabiting his body.

Boua raised herself from the time she was seven, gathering firewood and water from the forest long before that. The boy who would become her first husband began to visit her in the night before she turned fourteen—he was kind but clumsy and not gentle with her, though she had not yet become fertile. Her father was eager for her to marry the boy because he was a hard worker from a good family with many members under the proper token.

"Did you love him?" Apai once asked, when they were sharing their stories.

"How would I know the answer to that?" she said.

That she had never been farther than the next village but wanted to make an independent life in Luang Prabang struck Apai as both brave and foolhardy: though many men had made that

journey, he would not know what to expect in a large city or how to survive—whom to go to for shelter and advice upon arriving, how to feed himself.

Out of respect for her father's condition Apai had no expectation that they would make love that night. He sat out on the veranda watching the sun fall below the mountains in the direction from which they had trekked, the spaces between the peaks to the west filling with lavender blues and wisps of rose. The cicadas sang with their controlled desperation, the rhythms changing every quarter hour or so. From where he watched the sunset he could see Boua bathing with water from the pot filled by the mountain spring, chatting with a woman. Apai moved to another part of the veranda so as not to ogle them. When the sounds of their conversation ceased, however, he glanced out at her again. She was alone now, taking her time. She seemed to be enjoying the feel of the cold water on her skin underneath her sarong. Apai came out on the veranda and sat in the corner, when no other house could see him. He felt concealed in the low light. A full moon had risen in the still–blue-grey sky; Boua's skin reflected what was left of it and glowed as if illuminated. As she ran her hands over her bent knee, the water made it shine as well.

She had seen Apai, kept eye contact with him with a slight smile on her face as if she knew she was about to best him in some game. For some reason Apai imagined that it was from her belly that they had cut the cord—that she had been connected to Little Bear through that place on her body. He wanted to be down there with her on his knees washing that imaginary wound, massaging the soap into parts of her that must have ached from all the hours carrying Little Bear with no break. Streams of water fell off her hair as she rinsed it, squeezing it out. For a moment she stood facing him directly, feet together, shoulders back, as if her body was a question to him that met his gaze with equal boldness. Even as he felt some embarrassment for

watching her he expanded with love for her—he almost couldn't maintain her stare but marveled at her physical grace and bald confidence. Her outline had started to dissolve into the approaching night but her straight shoulders were visible, as were the tops of her feet and a wet crown of moonlight on her head.

Although Chanpen sometimes made him feel smaller with her disappointment that eventually led him to question himself, he never felt unworthy of her. Boua, on the other hand, challenged his sense of himself in the way that she moved through her life as if she was unencumbered by shame, second-guessing, or insecurity. She may have wanted him, but she did not necessarily need him and at every turn she surprised him, so that it felt like she was leading him and he was powerless to chart a different course, when rationally he knew that he was the one who decided how often he made the trek to be with her. When they were together it was all he could do to hold on, like being on a mule on steep, treacherous ground, and suddenly feeling the relationship reversed—surrendering to the power of the surefooted being in order to let it keep you both alive. He needed her love like water or air and was completely at her mercy; his desire for her hung above him like a persistent fog, like the minutes before the lightning strike, like furious, impartial weather. When she walked back to the house she didn't come over to him to chat; they didn't speak a word as she passed. He lingered out there, letting night fully take hold, the flickering shadow-on-shadow of moths from the forest flying past him in the dark.

In the house, she prepared her father's tobacco pipe and fed Little Bear. It was difficult to describe how, exactly—it seemed ridiculous, in fact—but something about her connection with the baby looked less like mother and child and more like that of coequals. Perhaps it was the content, matter-of-fact way that Little Bear fed—not groping or needy but adult-like, almost regal. Her entitled demeanor suggested that Boua might have been the servant and Little Bear the

queen. At other moments they ceased to seem like separate beings at all—Little Bear as part of a whole, the appendage of a single strange animal whose systems worked in harmony to supply itself with energy and heat, milk and blood. It occurred to Apai that there was no one in the world he was even remotely as close to as Boua was to their child. Is that what he was searching for, that level of emotional attachment? If so, finding it would forever be impossible. Still, he wondered what closeness would develop with Little Bear if he were there every day—nothing that could compare to that between a baby and its mother, surely, but how would it compare to that between a man and wife? What unique depths could it achieve unencumbered by the fluctuations of cynicism and fatigue in a relationship between adults, and aided by the connection of a common blood?

When she had put the baby down she folded and put away her sarong in a wooden chest. Ta Tiang's gentle wheezing signaled that he was already asleep. The men from the city kept their voices to a murmur; somewhere a dog snarled at another. Otherwise, the village was quiet.

She said nothing when she came to where Apai already lay in bed and lowered herself over him. Her skin was dry now but her hair was still damp where it brushed the side of his face and shoulder. With her breasts in his hands he tasted the drops of sweet liquid that remained there; she was nearly as tall as him and it seemed that there was a vast length from her waist to her tailbone. Her skin puckered with gooseflesh. A question about whether she would feel different after having the baby flashed through his mind but just as quickly he found himself unable to remember what she felt like before, and this thought, all part of the same thought, aroused him further, reminding him of the blissful sense of discovery he felt when he was alone with her. She put her hand between his buttocks greedily, in a way Chanpen never had, running her fingers along the piece of flesh under his balls and then cupping them, patiently massaging

them while his penis rested against the underside of her arm. The contrast between the coolness of her demeanor and the warm, wet way she kissed him, the comforting roughness of her pubic hair and the commanding slickness it gave way to, the viscous scent in the air like a marking of territory—all of it made his head feel like it was filling up with a thick perfume. Her scent would stay on him for days if he wanted it to. Each time he had to set off on the journey home he took that gift with him, her smell of cedar and tobacco and citrus and musk clinging to him like a scarf around his face, the olfactory texture of which could transport him back under her again in the dark with the chatting of the forest and the wheezing of her father woven into the music of her determined breath, her almost indignant sounds as she rolled her hips over him like a mortar rolling side to side in a pestle. As the pleasure welled up in her she seemed to be fighting back against it, frustrated that she should have to wait for release. The thickness of her scent left Apai with little control of his own climax, but the angry sounds in his ear, the firm pressure of her teeth on his skin, put enough fear into his body to allow him to stay with her until she uttered the profane Khmu slang he had never heard before but understood to be a curse of this unfair nature of the body, made to be coupled with another to unlock the depth of pleasure that she would surely be glad to keep entirely for herself if she could. Instead, she cursed him and devoured him at the same time.

Laying there in the dark, catching his breath, it was hard for him to know how loud they'd been—their sounds seemed muffled and restrained in the moment but now, just a few minutes later, they reverberated in his mind so that for all he knew they had been shouting. But both her father and Little Bear were still deep in sleep.

Slowly, the village intruded again: the grunts of a few pigs jostling for position where they lay; crickets and frogs calling out to their kind.

“I should be here to take care of you,” Apai said.

“Your first wife would not want to come to Laos.”

“She doesn’t know about you.”

“I don’t know much about her either.”

“She’s serious, but—”

“I wasn’t asking. I’m sure she’s a good person.”

Every so often while they spoke, a part of Apai’s attention would be pulled toward Little Bear, or the idea of her—that she existed, that a part of him lived on as its own independent will.

“Can I ask you a question?” she said. “Why did you insist on marrying me? No one ever asked you to.”

A series of answers came to him, all true, all also made up on the spot.

“I love you,” he said.

Saying it plucked some sad string in his heart, because he could not say those words to her without being reminded that she had asked him to accept a paradox: to not expect her to say them back, and at the same time to not assume it meant she did not love him too.

“But that’s not the real reason, I suppose. I respect you. I respect your father. I wanted to respect myself.”

“Respect?” she said.

“I wanted to help take care of you. I wanted to honor these other pieces of my heart.”

“And who is going to take care of you?” she said.

“My daughter, when she grows up.” He said it lightheartedly, only half serious, but felt a tinge of elation from the words “my daughter.”

“Not your wife? Your wives?”

He said it again, with more conviction this time: “I know it may become difficult, but for now I want to stay here,” he said. He was on unfamiliar ground; he had almost no idea what would come out of his own mouth next. It was like watching someone else make a decision. “I want to keep you all safe.”

She laughed. “Apai, you are the gentlest, most naïve man sleeping in this village tonight. It took you almost a year to learn that you were trading for something illegal.”

“I was young.”

“You were innocent. There’s a difference.” Then, she said, “You can’t stay here.”

“Your father said—”

“I know what my father said and I know that he is concerned because I was here when my brother came and told us about what he’d seen. My father is right to be scared.”

“I can take you all somewhere.”

“This load is several times larger than anything your caravan has carried in the past—do you know that? Much more than what we grew in our village—we are trading on behalf of villages several days’ walk away. The caravan will need you and they will not allow you to go anywhere else but back to Bo Luang. Besides, you know my father cannot travel.”

“What about your brother? Will he help?”

“It’s my job to take care of father.” After a silence, she said, “But I will let you take care of Little Bear.”

For a moment he did not understand what she was proposing. He thought perhaps she meant giving money, which of course he would do.

“You can take her back to your village. If you are telling the truth that you still don’t have any children, there is a chance your wife will grow to love her.”

Apai wanted to protest that he could never take Little Bear away from her—the girl was part of her like a new, vital organ, a reverse image of the tumor that had attached itself under her father's skin. Or rather, he wanted *to want* to protest. He knew he should say no but in fact the idea filled him with a warm light.

"The caravan would not like it," he said.

"Then you should not tell them."

"And how—"

"I told you she only sleeps. And when she is awake she is content anywhere—wrapped in my sling, bumping along while I carry the water or wash our clothes."

"Can she also hold the reins of a mule?"

"Funny. We can put her in a Htin basket. You will need plenty of rags and you will need to change them often during the day and wash them at night. The rocking of the mule will put her right to sleep—she will be even quieter than your other cargo."

The idea sounded far-fetched to Apai.

"I know my child," she said.

"Where will I find milk for her?"

"I have already started feeding her fruit and taro. You chew it for her first."

"And will she make that happy eating sound—'mnumnum…' "

Boua smiled in the dark; he could hear it in her voice.

"Yes, and she will fart as loud as a mule."

Apai knew he could never make the whole journey with his secret cargo unnoticed, but as Boua assured him it seemed possible that he could make it for a day, far enough that they couldn't turn back. The city men would grumble, but what could they do?

"I will need to make sure we take the low road back. The high road would be too dangerous. We lost a mule on the way here. But I know the city men will also not want to agree to return by that road."

As he said this, an uncomfortable thought pushed its way to the forefront of his consciousness: although Boua described with confidence how they would hide their valuables and move, the safety of her village was much more at risk than either of them were acknowledging. If her father couldn't travel to Bo Luang, how far could he travel from their village? Could he leave his bed? And how soon would trouble reach them? Nobody knew, but he had a feeling that Boua wasn't sharing with him the full extent of her concerns. Taking Little Bear made it possible to save at least one of them if something happened.

"I will bring her. It will be a game to see how long I can keep her hidden from the stingy complainers in the party. But I will come back on my own as soon as I can to make sure you are ok."

"And in the meantime, I will do whatever I need to do to be ok."

He assumed she was referring to the journey to Luang Prabang, but she might have also been raising the possibility of finding another husband.

Despite his marriage to her, he did not actually feel that he had a claim to her. She would continue to refuse to be claimed. But in his love for her, his still-fresh desire, as well as a confused sense of honor and selfish attachment and a shortsighted impulse to say the right-sounding thing at the expense of honesty, he said, "We will always be a family."

He felt her hardening next to him, ready to take a different tack if he faltered in carrying through with her suggestion. He knew, too, that as aching as his attachment to Boua was for him, her sorrow at losing Little Bear was already tearing her apart, even as she joked about the baby's

wind to leaven the moment and make it feel normal. In giving him the child she was tearing out a piece of herself, asking him to take it quickly and go so as not to watch her bleed.

"Of course you will do what's best for you," he said. "Of course."

III

If it was true that there are no secrets in villages, Chanpen hoped that her relationship with Nuan came as close as possible. A yellow sash tied to the branch of one of the teak trees in the stand on the hill between their houses meant it was safe for her to visit, that he wasn't expecting any visitors that evening and if any came he would turn them away. Nuan lived alone, with the exception of a nephew who tended his fruit trees in exchange for lodging in a small structure farther over on the hill. And because he lived alone, it was almost always safe to visit. The real significance of the yellow sash, then, what it meant more simply, was that he *desired* to be with her that night. Because she desired to be with him with such a maddening intensity in turn, the hours of interminable waiting between the time she first saw the sash in bright daylight and nightfall, when she could safely make her way over to him via the forested upper trail, were nearly unpleasant enough to make the whole encounter not worth it. Nearly, but not quite: this was the nauseating feeling of falling for someone who did not need your love.

It had started when Apai was away on the caravan, of course. She honestly had no intention to initiate a romance. (All unfaithful women surely say this, she thought to herself.) The first time she approached the house, nearly a year ago, she carried—ridiculously, through the forest when it was nearly dark—a half pot of beef soup. The weight of it sloshed to and fro in her hands in time with the feelings in her stomach, which itself also felt like a half-full pot of soup

carried nervously in a dim mountain trail. They hadn't yet established the signal of the yellow flag. She was responding to an invitation, though the fact that she was carrying her soup through the concealed upper path rather than walking along the regular village path was a clear indication even to her, even if part of her wanted to remain in denial, that she knew exactly what her purpose was, why she had been invited and what kind of greeting she expected. Was she to simply climb his stairs and walk in his door? Again, they hadn't decided on any signal that would make him come down and greet her. They were still pretending that it was a normal visit.

Earlier that day, a cow had broken its leg while grazing on the hillside. The villagers gathered at Nuan's house because it was near to where the cow lay and because he had a stretch of convenient, level ground where they could work. They spread banana leaves on the ground in a long row, enough space for at least a dozen people to work, and took to disassembling the cow and dividing up its meat—a variety for everyone, pieces of the loin and shoulder with portions of the sweeter organs and intestines. Each person had their own task as the meat was passed down the line—cleaning the intestine, say, or dividing in good-sized portions for as many as possible. It was celebration as much as labor—there was lao khao and nam prik with fried pork skins and someone was passing around a basket of sweet green oranges. The men and women sang as they worked, playful songs about youthful flirtation, stuffed with humorous innuendo. The baskets of raw beef they filled were stuffed, too—no one left that night disappointed with the share they received. The work went into the evening; they finished their cleaning by lamplight.

Though it was held at his house, Nuan did little to help with the actual butchering and dividing. He preferred to mingle among those gathered, allowing his nephew to do much of the tidying while Nuan made sure everyone had a sip from the rice whiskey cup. He had dropped by on Chanpen earlier that day, as he frequently did when Apai was gone—polite enquiries to offer

a basket of longgan from his tree or to ask if she needed any help with anything while she was alone. The playful rhythm of his knock asked for a response. He had full hair that always seemed to have just been washed, with several strands of early gray that made him more handsome. He had thick, dark eyebrows and an open, honest face—when he smiled broadly at her, already with one arm leaning on the nearest post, his sleeves rolled up, he looked like a man from a city, which he had been, since coming back from the provincial capital after several years away. He gave the impression of being completely at ease, even when he was proposing something earth-shaking, as he did when they were conversing casually amidst the large group of people who had gathered for the dividing of the beef, people including her brothers and cousins and nearby neighbors, and, confident that no one could hear them over the merry-making, he proposed she return later that evening to bring him a taste of the sour beef soup she had described, her grandmother's recipe. He was, after all—as he explained with a confident grin—such a mediocre cook.

Three hours into the return trip and already there had been numerous times when Apai felt sure someone would hear Little Bear whimpering or making amused gurgling sounds to herself. But the clodding of hooves and the noise of the lead mule's wooden bell covered any sound for the rest of the men, who were bleary from a night of rice whiskey and pretending they would not have to be back on the trail again that morning. Boua brought one of the large weave rattan baskets into the house the night before and packed it ingeniously so that Little Bear's bottom sat snugly in a circular seat made of twisted cloth. Together with a flat board of woven bamboo to which she was firmly swaddled, the apparatus kept the baby cradled in place and left open space at the bottom so that any wetness could simply fall through the large holes in the

basket. Boua filled out the space behind Little Bear with raw cotton, so that the baby sat lying back at an angle that allowed her to sleep. From the lid of the basket she hung a ball of thread she liked to stare at. There would be plenty of air for her and even a little light.

To test her contraption Boua had lain Little Bear in it for the night; after a minute or so of uncertainty about her new environment, she settled quietly in for sleep. Very early that morning, Boua showed Apai how to chew boiled rice and banana and hold Little Bear as if she was about to be breastfed before pressing his lips to hers and portioning out the mush directly into her mouth. She loved the banana, balled her fists and waved her arms in delight. Boua breastfed her then to ensure that she would be full and sleepy for the first hours of their trek. When Little Bear finished, Boua showed Apai how to hold her with a hand under her knees so that her bottom hung down in the position in which she was most comfortable emptying her bowels, which she did two or three times a day, usually after eating. At only four months, she had already learned that this posture was the signal for her to relieve herself. Boua made a shushing sound in Little Bear's ear as she held her above the bush and she went on cue. If she shat in the basket, Apai hoped to be able to wash it through with some water. Seeing Little Bear's impressive production that morning he began to doubt the whole plan—what had seemed offbeat but plausible in the after-rush of their lovemaking seemed comical at best in the morning.

The hour before leaving the village had been nerve-wracking. Apai had intended to casually ask Liu if he could bring up the rear to begin the journey, but Liu had not stayed in the village with the rest of them and still had not returned by that morning. Apai assumed Liu was simply visiting relatives in another village as he had sometimes done in the past, but it was unlike Liu cause an inconvenience of any kind.

If the city men had heard the rumors about raids, they betrayed no concern. Apai used the

extra time to speak with the Haw about the issue, partly to keep him occupied and away from Namwan, who he'd left in a separate, more removed barn from the rest of the mules, waiting until the last possible moment to bring Little Bear out in her basket to fasten to Namwan's saddle. Boua stayed close enough to Namwan to be there if the baby started fussing. The Haw listened intently while Apai recounted his conversation with Boua's father, but he didn't say anything, didn't even indicate if he was familiar with this news, if he believed it or put it into the category of unhelpful rumor. But something, clearly, was making him uneasy—a welcome observation for Apai, actually, as it allowed him to worry less about his own situation. When Liu arrived, nearly an hour late and at almost full dawn, his shirt was already soaked through with sweat. Avoiding eye contact, he apologized to the group.

The Haw denied Apai's request to bring up the rear, but once the caravan began its forward motion Apai felt more at ease. When, less than an hour into the journey, a trickle of liquid dripped through the bottom of Little Bear's basket, Apai thought that surely the Haw would hear it, turn around, and zero in on his stowaway. He didn't, and no one else noticed either.

After about three hours they took a break by a stream and Apai was able to lead Namwan away to a partially secluded spot along the water. While Namwan drank, he quickly chewed banana, mixed it with plenty of water, and unswaddled Little Bear. The sound of the stream covered her fussing and then her exclamations of excitement as she ate greedily, mnum-mnumming her way through two dwarf bananas and some mango. Toward the end Apai held her with her bottom hanging low over the riverbed. "Shhh," he said. "Good girl. Quickly." He made the shushing sound in the baby's ear again and it came, soft and wet on the sandy bank. Apai splashed some water on her bottom and quickly placed her back in the basket. Above, back on

the trail, the others had already gathered to set off again.

In this way, the two of them made it much farther from the village than Apai had ever expected. At times Little Bear was so loud, and the rest of the men so oblivious, that Apai in his walking trance would momentarily forget that no one knew about his stowaway. He would imagine what his homecoming might be like and how he would introduce the news to Chanpen. For Apai, in these moments of forgetting it was natural to everyone in the caravan that he would be bringing a baby back with them, as common as cotton and opium.

Around noon they stopped again for their longer break, and again Apai led his mule away from the rest, behind a stand of bamboo. He would have more time for this stop but he didn't want to raise suspicion, so he worked just as quickly as before, holding Little Bear in his arms and feeding her as fast as she would take it. She squirmed this time, tired of being constrained, so Apai set her down in the soft bed of narrow bamboo leaves that covered the ground. He continued to feed her and she was more content, sitting fairly still but pinching a dried leaf between her little thumb and forefinger. When she had finished eating and Apai picked her up again, something tickled Apai's arm where it supported her bare legs, crawling up over the back of his hand. Before Apai could brush away all of the red ants, swiping frantically like he was trying to put out a fire, Little Bear let out a startled scream that carried up the little hollow where the group rested. She wailed; she had been bitten.

Even before Apai could calm the baby, Aek was upon him.

"You slave-fucking fool!" he said.

Apai stood with Little Bear in his arms, gently bouncing her to calm her down. A few other city men followed Aek.

"Did you meet her here? Where is she?" Aek shouted over the baby's frightened crying,

holding his gun higher now, pointing it across the stream, scanning the forest for visitors.

Apai gathered his voice and explained that he'd brought Little Bear with him, alone. He showed Aek the basket.

"Fucking buffalo!" Aek said. Apai bristled at the insult and Aek's liberal use of his gun as a way of pointing at things, but he dared not speak. Instead, he went stone-faced.

Aek tugged on Apai's shirtsleeve as he led him back to the others. Noi grabbed the lead of Apai's mule and followed behind them.

"Your guide has secret cargo!" Aek said as they approached the Haw. The Haw, as was his special gift, looked unperturbed, though he must have been as surprised as everyone else. Liu gawked at the little bundle of flesh—who was crying more softly now but still teary and sniffling—like she was a foreign object from a faraway land, invested with magical powers of ambiguous consequences. Porkball smiled and walked up as if to comfort Little Bear until Aek glowered him away.

The Haw and Aek conferred for several minutes about what to do while Apai took questions from several of the men about how he managed to smuggle such a noisy passenger without them noticing.

"She's strong and fat!" Porkball said, as proud as if it was his own daughter.

Toom spit on his finger and rubbed it into the ant bite as a salve. "The pain will disappear soon," he cooed. "It already feels better, doesn't it, little one?"

The others inspected the carrying basket and brought the bamboo cradleboard and swaddling cloth back from the spot where Apai had been discovered. When the Haw and Aek returned, Aek delivered the verdict: Apai would continue to carry his load for the caravan but he would ride at a distance behind them, so as not to endanger the group. He still seethed at Apai's

stunt.

"Endanger?" Porkball said.

"We are always at risk—this we already knew—" Aek said, staring again at Apai—"but never before as much as now."

"If we're worried about an ambush, why don't we let him walk in front?" Dtom said.

"If we're worried about an ambush, why don't we put away that annoying wooden bell?" Noi said, nodding to the lead mule.

"Keep your rifles oiled and loaded," the Haw said, "and stay alert. Silence won't help us here. Good aim might. Apai will ride behind us so as not to be a distraction."

Apai was grateful to the Haw for letting him follow behind. Only after seeing the unhinged fury on Aek's face as he glided around the stand of bamboo, nose of his rifle pointed forward, did it occur to him that, left to his own devices, there were other, more impulsive actions he might have taken.

She hated the upper trail at night, especially at the point where it forked. When she first started making that walk, she immediately made a satuang. Her faith in rituals was half-hearted at best, but if there was anywhere in the village that was frequented by an evil spirit, it was that one, so she cut a chunk from the fiber of a banana tree, searched out some orange candles, fashioned little flags from dried reeds and and shaped clay into the miniature figures of the proper animals. When she left the satuang underneath a bush at the forked crossing the following evening, she found evidence of previous concerns similar to her own: the remains of a much older one, its sides having fallen open and laying flat on the ground, its sticky rice long picked out of its clumps of earth and consumed by some lucky creature, or—if she took the ritual

literally, which she didn't, exactly—the harmful spirit it was meant to appease.

That first night, she descended slowly down the slope behind his house, both because the path was almost completely unlit under the dark moon and because she didn't know what to do once she reached his land. Her pulse beat loudly behind her ears. A politer gesture would have been for him to come and collect her, to escort her back. He had proposed the meeting with such nonchalance that it was almost unclear to her now if she had really been invited at all—had she misunderstood his suggestion? She could hear a woman scolding someone in one of the houses below Nuan's; the cicadas had softened but some still buzzed in a way that went right through her and propelled her, in her nervousness and excitement and fear, to take several more steps forward toward the tall posts of his house.

At the firm grip on her arm she almost screamed—would have, if he hadn't also put a finger to her lips as he pulled her into him. In her shock she let go of the pot and the soup went splashing onto their feet and clanged against its lid when it hit the ground. It was fortunate, she thought, even in her disorientation, that it was no longer very hot.

Nuan slid into a silent, breathless, chest-seizing chuckle. Despite her silence and her anger—only half-genuine when she hit him, but she hit him hard on the arm; she was not amused—he couldn't stop himself, getting carried away by his silent laugh until he was nearly crying on her shoulder. It wasn't funny, she said, and she hoped no one had heard the noise of the pot. In this way the true nature of her visit was acknowledged from the beginning without the words being spoken—it was implicit in the efforts they both made to be silent under his house. Chanpen shook uncomfortably with adrenaline and, although she did not consider it an auspicious sign that her first feelings upon finding Nuan's arms were fright, embarrassment, and a spoonful of the anger she'd hoped to leave behind at her own house, the prank also gave her an

excuse to smile and feign a playful disapproval, which masked her tension long enough for it to dissipate. They stood there for a moment as Nuan gained his composure from laughing. He pulled his face from her shoulder but they remained standing close.

"What if someone hears?" she said. "Your nephew—"

"Bok."

"Yes. What if he comes to investigate?"

"Then I will send him away."

"Regardless, your beef soup is on the ground," she said.

"Some of it is on my feet. My sandals will taste delicious."

"You deserve to eat sandals."

"The chickens will appreciate it in the morning."

"More than you did, I can see."

He made a high sound in his throat, as if to signal that he was impressed with her biting words.

"Is that the last of it?" he asked. He'd taken her hand in his, gently stroking her palm. The pot remained on the ground.

"I suppose there's no more reason for me to be here," she said, a combination of teasing and uncertainty her voice.

"I could make you sandal soup," he said, stepping closer to her.

"That is the very least romantic thing any man has ever said to a woman in the dark. You couldn't have done worse if you spent all day thinking about it."

"I *have* spent all day thinking about it," he said. "But not sandals, and not soup." Before he led her up his stairs he put the empty pot on an outdoor table, and she remembered thinking

that some animal was going to get into it, that she would be woken in the middle of the night to the sounds of a creature licking the last film of grease from the unwieldy round vessel, stealing a meal that it barely had to work for, that fell, as it were, right into its lap.

Aek insisted that Apai and Little Bear—"the children," he called them—make camp separately as well, but the Haw drew the line at the evening meal. It would not do to have a member of the party eating separately; it would surely invite unfriendly spirits.

Apai held Little Bear on his knee with one hand and ate with the other, keeping a strong grip so as not to let her crawl toward the fire. She wore a brightly striped hat and her fat cheeks glowed like embers. Apai didn't dare feed her food from his own mouth in front of the other men, so he put it on the end of a spoon and shoveled it in between her puckered lips. Porkball offered her bites of the small fish they'd netted from the stream earlier that evening but Apai politely declined.

"Your breasts must be able to…make some milk," the Eel said to Porkball. The others laughed.

Little Bear continued to eat heartily. Apai reconsidered and accepted a pinch of fish for her, eliciting her jovial "mnumm-num" of appreciation.

"She is a handsome one," Toom said. An awkward silence ensued. Perhaps they were embarrassed to be charmed by the baby; perhaps they felt Aek's disdain like warped air over the fire. Aek stabbed a ball of sticky rice into his banana leaf, tossed a bone into the coals. Apai left with the baby as soon as the meal was finished.

He had decided to sleep at the base of a massive teak tree about fifty yards from where the rest of them set up camp. In the distance, the caravan's fire threw sparks and smoke up

toward the canopy. Between the branches of the teak the sky was a riot of stars. Apai considered whether he should build his own fire. The nights were not yet so cold that they would need the heat and it did not feel like rain. It was not unheard of for an animal to approach at night, but it would be difficult to gather wood while watching Little Bear. He decided to set a candle on a stick to keep away curious nocturnal visitors.

He wrapped Little Bear in her own small blanket and tucked her in with him, resting her in the crux of his left arm. Apai could feel her heartbeat against his own ribs. Very quickly the child gave in to sleep, unfazed by the light of the candle or the particular air of the forest, which must have tasted strange to her, different than the air in her village with its familiar smell of cooking smoke in their house, the pigs and chickens underneath. Did she know she was on an adventure? Sitting under those brilliant stars, calmed by the rustling of the branches of a great tree at night, did she experience some incipient version of the exhilaration that Apai felt the first time he joined the caravan, seeing everything along the route afresh? How does the first taste of a banana compare to the first act of making love? Already breathing heavily on Apai's chest, she seemed content but exhausted, full to brimming with life and past her capacity to take in more of anything.

Apai's earliest memory remained with him like a still image: looking up from the floor of his childhood house, the wooden planks worn down to a polish, with the exception of a black crescent where a pot had scorched the boards. Something boiling on the fire. Impossibly far across the room his grandfather bare to the waist, sitting cross-legged, thin legs like gnarled sticks dangling from his sarong. He had the sense that they were talking about him but not directly *to* him. He was shy. He might have been hiding his face in his hands.

For months after killing it, Apai saw his tiger frozen in her pose of ambivalent curiosity:

halted mid-stride, only her face turning to look at him. In this version of the moment there was an eternity in which the tiger willingly waited for him to make a decision about whether or not to shoot. He knew this memory was a waking dream, an unconscious fabrication meant to assuage him somehow. Had he taken the tiger's life, had the tiger given it, or had it been something else entirely? He felt her gliding toward them in the night, a steady progression, no need any more for sleep.

He dreamt of something pressing down on his chest and when he woke the candle had gone out and he was disoriented, the net of stars above him his only reference point. His left arm tingled and for the briefest moment he mistook the bundle that rested on it for a block of opium. He shifted to release himself from under Little Bear without waking her up.

As he searched in the dark for his matches, a glow in the distance through the forest caught his attention, like the moon behind a cloud at eye-level. It hovered and shifted and Apai moved toward it until he was close enough to see that it was two men sharing a candle of their own. They had gone off the trail and were huddled behind a large tree. Apai could hear them whispering but their words were unintelligible. Part of him thought he should go back for his gun but he also didn't want to overreact. And then, too, he was nervous—too much walking could cause him to be heard. He took a few steps closer. One of the men turned so that Apai could see it was Aek, his face clearly illuminated in the candlelight. He held up a paper for another man whose silhouette was completely in shadow.

Little Bear's first soft cry carried so clearly that it sounded like she was just over Apai's shoulder. Aek looked up from his paper and Little Bear cried again, more confidently this time. Aek's candle went out. Apai had seen him look in his direction. He didn't think he'd been spotted but Apai could hardly see them either now and he thought they might be walking toward

him. Little Bear continued her full-throated cry. Crouching behind the trunk of an overturned tree, Apai held still, resisting his instinct to hurry to her. He felt like he already knew his daughter, that he recognized the difference in her crying between the fright of waking up in the unfamiliar dark and a true danger that Apai did not want to imagine. After a moment two voices appeared near him, walking briskly in his direction, toward the main path. Aek cursed Little Bear under his breath. Apai could have reached out and grabbed his pant leg, but he kept his head down and still did not see the face of the other man. After a minute he saw their shapes pass in front of the glow from the dwindling fire of the main camp and he picked his way back through the forest to the trail toward Little Bear, glad to have the sounds of his footfall masked by her softening but still beseeching sounds. Despite his lingering fear his heart also raced with a peculiar momentary gratitude and an incongruent, almost domestic thrill at the sound of his baby in the dark, as if he had been woken up in the comfort of his own home for the first time by a newborn and it had become real to him that he would possess the burdensome joy of taking care of this person for the rest of his life.

His gratitude was indeed momentary—in fact, he was far from comforted by whatever it was that he had seen. He lay awake groping for explanations. Should he tell the Haw? Because he couldn't make out the other figure, he wasn't confident. Surely it wasn't the Haw or Liu that Aek was conferring with, but the longer Apai turned it over in his mind, the less confident he became. Most disconcerting was not the *what*, but the *when*: it must have been something urgent for them to risk meeting at night, when the strangeness of their behavior would be undeniable if they were caught, rather than simply wandering off from camp one evening under the pretense of gathering wood or hunting for squirrel. He felt angry at himself for bringing the child, foolish for the frequent moments in which he forgot his circumstances and indulged in the weight of her

little torso. Too often he caught himself looking forward to a comfortable life that did not exist yet and would not exist if he failed to get them both home unharmed.

At the first hint of grey he got up, relieved himself, and pulled a cloth patch out of his pack to swab out his rifle. He measured a charge of black powder and followed it into the muzzle with a ball lubricated with a mixture of beeswax and tallow. He tapped the butt on the ground and used his ramrod to confirm that his bullet was firm against the powder charge. It was a slow process, from an entirely different century as the mechanisms in the rifles carried by the others, and it meant that he rarely had more than a single shot at his target. The loading ritual calmed him; he believed it made him more judicious and focused before eventually pulling the trigger. Still, he did not usually trek with a loaded gun.

He had just finished pushing the bullet down the bore when Little Bear whimpered for breakfast.

"Someday," Apai said while peeling her banana, "I will teach you how to shoot." And he thought, but did not say to her out loud, "The world is an unpredictable place, full of dangerous surprises. A horn full of powder gives you the illusion, at least, of control."

The morning after that first time she went to see him, she made it home without encountering anyone. Instead of entering her house, she continued past her steps, past the chickens who expected to be fed and tottered around in circles on the verge of hysteria when they weren't. A piece of the sky had begun to blossom into a pinkish grey, but you could not yet call it dawn. She followed the main path to the center of Bo Luang, where she sat by the river behind the salt huts and waited for the rest of the village to awaken.

If anyone saw her sitting there weaving long blades of grass into balls and tossing them

into the clear water, she wasn't aware of it. Perhaps her newfound power to move invisibly through the world wasn't new at all, but had always been with her, ready to be accessed when the right time came. A sound like a river mammal rolling in the shallows directed her attention to a basket trap anchored near the bank, a fat white-jeweled carp caught inside and straining to get out, its glittering body nearly folded in half in the confines of the trap. Her father taught her how to weave such traps when she was young—at the time it made her feel vindicated in front of her brothers who, though younger than her, lorded over her the responsibilities their parents entrusted to them simply because they were boys. In retrospect, her father probably taught her for the simple reason that he wanted better traps than what her brothers made, and he knew she would treat the task with more diligence. He showed her how the size of the entry hole determined everything about the effectiveness of the trap—too big and the smaller fish could escape; too small and the larger fish would not enter. The trick was knowing what size fish to aim for based on what was common in the stream at that time of year. Unlike her brothers, she took his instructions to heart and would unweave an entire basket if her execution didn't meet her own standards, even if her father wouldn't have noticed the error, even if he would have been pleased. It was in her nature to do things exactly according to how they should be done, a trait she had in common with Apai. Life was like that, she thought as the fish struggled in vain to turn around in its woven cage: easy openings all around us, if only we had the awareness to move through them. Or perhaps it was something else: that the openings are an illusion because they only reveal themselves in retrospect and, like a fish caught in a trap, as much as we would like to we can never swim backwards.

Across the river, past the long grass at the bank, Uncle Naroon restacked firewood behind their house, oblivious to her presence. Chanpen stepped down into the water, hiked up her

sarong, and urinated. The swift, cold water churned against the back of her calves and splashed up into her buttocks. The sun had come up so that it laid down its light like a bright white moss on the undulations of the water. A minnow flitted past her right ankle. Finishing, she turned to look behind her, upstream where the big bridge spanned the crossing. Again, not a soul was there to catch her. With her new powers of invisibility she could bathe naked in the cold water and walk through the center of the village to dry herself and no one would be the wiser.

After what must have been an hour but felt like much less time, she heard the lonely wooden bell of the local trader who made a wide circuit of the villages in the area, stopping through about once a month. He was a gentle old man and she felt empathy for him; she did not understand how he managed to carry so much, so far, for so little reward. More than once he had given her an item for nothing more than the promise to pay him back in the future.

She startled him, approaching from behind while he made his efforts to unpack and display his things.

"You're here early," she said.

"If I am always early, does that mean it's the normal time?" he said. "What are you in need of today, young lady?"

She wanted to correct his impression that she had been waiting for him, but she couldn't think of how to do it politely. He unpacked a pot, a cast iron stand for the kitchen fire, and baskets in various shapes. He had shirts for men and cloth for women, woven sandals and rubber shoes. On a metal tray he displayed three mirrors, each about the size of a hand, bordered in plastic frames.

"What will you take for one of those?" she asked.

He told her the price. He preferred paper money.

“Just a moment,” she said. She disappeared behind the salt huts and when she returned she held the fish firmly in both hands while it flailed in a last attempt to be free. Her hands barely fit around its midsection.

“A good faith gift until next time?” she said.

He looked around. He sensed that something unusual was happening. Seeing no one, he put the fish, still flapping, in a basket.

She thanked him and chose a mirror with a white frame, reiterating that she would find him again next month to pay him properly. Turning toward the sun, she looked at her reflection. She never had any illusions that she was the most beautiful girl in the village, but years of bearing children had already marked many women her age with the beginning of bird’s feet at the corners of their eyes or a permanent crease between their brows. She, however, had largely kept the supple features that she had taken for granted until recently.

“Beautiful,” the old man said.

“You’ve already sold it!” she said, playfully.

“The mirror doesn’t lie, and neither do I,” he said.

“You have a sweet mouth,” she said, “but today I agree. I am just wondering if it’s this morning, this light, or if it’s really me.”

That day the trail would take them along the river until they reached a steep slope alongside the falls, at the bottom of which there was a bridge that would allow them to cross. From there the rest of the journey was flat and easy, a day’s trek back to Bo Luang.

Because he followed at a distance, Apai occasionally lost sight of the caravan, when they went around a corner or were observed by foliage. At times it felt as if he was making the trek

entirely on his own. The strange events of the night before receded into a kind of a dream space and in the solitude he occasionally felt something like peace.

From some vantage points he could see the caravan in full: the Haw keeping the pace, Porkball struggling to keep up, Liu patiently bringing up the rear behind him. The river had increased in strength as they followed it down from the highest parts of the mountains and, after meeting with a tributary, was formidable now, flowing over large boulders, past thick fern and palm. Approaching the waterfall—he could hear it faintly in the distance—the river widened considerably.

Ahead of him, the caravan was absorbed into a thick grove of bamboo. When Apai reached it himself he descended a short slope that opened onto a long, gradual flattening out that followed the riverbank. The terrain rose sharply on both sides and in the far distance the edge of the water met the sky where the falls began, about one hundred yards away. As Apai reached the stretch by the riverbank he saw the others disappear one by one over the steep drop beside the falls.

A peripheral darting up on the forested slope above the opposite bank—a glint, perhaps. Was it someone moving behind the leaf cover, or a mere rustling of the wind? He stopped Namwan and scanned the ridge. It might have been a trick of his vision, the motion in the river transposed in the corner of his eye to the trees above.

If it was another party he should warn the others. He was about a third of the way to the falls, too far back to run to them, but he hesitated to fire a shot to alert them, for fear of leaving himself vulnerable while attempting to reload.

Only a few minutes after descending the slope with the rest of the caravan, Aek reappeared as if out of nowhere, walking toward him with his hand up, smiling. His rifle was

around his shoulder but his mule was nowhere to be seen. As Apai raised his hand too, not as a greeting but to caution Aek to stop and pay attention, he thought he saw it again, on his side of the river now through a gap in the foliage, a slithering of shadow and light like a line of men moving swiftly along an upper trail.

Apai pointed more vigorously. Aek, unmoved, continued to walk toward him with that strange smile on his face. With the rapids of the river behind him and the full groan of the falls up ahead, Aek would not hear him if he shouted. Apai pointed his rifle in the air and discharged a warning shot for the Haw and his men.

Aek kept smiling as the pops of gunfire started in the distance below, as the dogs bellowed in a ferocious way he had never heard before, all merging with the sound of the falls and amplified by the acoustics of the terrain. Even as the popping intensified, Aek barely flinched. He was smiling still, Apai thought—though he could not be sure; he could have had it all wrong—when he pointed his gun directly at Apai, fired, and Namwan went sliding over the riverbank.

He turned to see Namwan on her right side in the water with Little Bear's basket sitting atop her left side and a coloring of blood streaming out from under her. He turned back to Aek reloading his rifle, taking his time and, just as Apai jumped to slide down the bank, firing another shot in Apai's direction.

From the beginning, Chanpen didn't enter into her affair with Nuan with the hope—not consciously at least—that it would lead her to answers about how to approach her marriage and whether or not to abandon it all together. When it only made her more confused, however, she realized that she had indeed imagined big decisions would lead to more clarity, somehow, as if

by simply walking in a new direction one could develop a new reason for being over there, rather than here.

She was angry, yes, a constricting, persistent irritation, as if her brain was swollen and sore, but at what, exactly, she had never fully discerned. Her bad fortune at not being able to conceive a child was part of it, as was the condition of not being able to assign blame, even if that blame lay with herself. It was commonly assumed that infertility was a problem with the woman, a result of a lack of harmony with the spirits of her ancestors, but she was smarter than that. She would never know if it was her or Apai who was at fault, and this ambiguity, even more than the deprivation of children, was what frustrated her most when she thought about that part of her life. Her anger also wasn't merely about their fertility—something else about her relationship with Apai had gotten under her skin so thoroughly that there were times when she couldn't imagine ever clearing it out. At these times she felt trapped by her sense of loyalty and her fear that, seen as defective, she would never have another chance at love. And yet, she bristled at the idea of being governed by fear of uncertainty.

Despite Apai's frequent displays of effort toward improving the material conditions of their life, and despite his regaling of her with his grand plans, she didn't trust that, even if they lived in a better house on flatter land closer to the water, she would ever have the emotional security that came with a partner who was truly present, comfortable in his own skin and unquestioningly sure of the choices he had made in his life and the direction they were taking him now. This lack of ability to be still and solid in his emotions made him obtuse at times, unaware of the effect he had on people or of what they needed from him. Or what they intended to take away.

Apai's deficit of emotional intelligence was at least in part responsible for his falling out

with her two brothers, which left her isolated in her own village. Even if there was no way for them to join the caravan, he could have at least pretended he was disappointed on their behalf. He enjoyed his unique responsibility as guide and couldn't hide his ambivalence about the idea of sharing an experience that set him apart. Her sisters remained kind and generous to her, but their husbands clearly feared reprisals from her brothers—or weren't as skilled at changing face as her sisters—and they, too, remained aloof enough that Apai felt uncomfortable inviting them to hunt with him, let alone asking them for help in building a house. It was a fact of life: goodwill was a currency in a small village, more valuable than silver.

And it was indeed anger that she felt. As a sharp, observant child she had learned all of the typical lessons about the importance of keeping a cool heart, not holding on to grudges, not letting her feelings overcome her. But over and over again, she had also seen how passive acceptance merely perpetuated unacceptable behavior. That she had failed to truly release this anger in all its force on Apai she regretted; that it had crept into other areas of her life was unfortunate too. But she held on to a perverse hope that the right moment to let her anger loose would come eventually and that it might productively adjust something between them. First, she had to find a way to crystallize for herself what exactly she wanted, and why.

Meanwhile, aside from his general solicitousness in the year or so before she first went over to him with her pot of soup, there were no specific kindnesses that she could point to as the reason why she felt herself falling in love with Nuan. Unless one counted his confidence, which registered to her as a form of kindness. There was something relieving—unburdening, uncluttering—and therefore almost considerate about the way that the ease with which he inhabited a place, even his own body, cleared away the obstructing uncertainties that she often felt radiating from Apai. Nuan's comfort with himself and with her opened up space between

them for more electric forms of uncertainty and the rewards that came with pushing past them, too—the thrill of approaching new doors in her heart and deciding to open them; jumping off each romantic ledge with no solid idea of what lies below.

Nuan came to her house on the third night, but it made Chanpen too nervous, and from then on they only met at his. Bok would occasionally be working on the edge of the property, but he never came close enough to risk them being heard. Nuan was an experienced and attentive lover, never thrown off by the awkwardnesses of the body or the inhibitions that she showed in the first few times they were together. He patiently but persistently opened her up so that she felt herself to be in a continual process of unfolding when she was with him. In the succession of a single evening she was a caterpillar feeding on a leaf, a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, and that same butterfly pinned and mounted to a board, beautiful and preserved. Each iteration felt right, including and especially the last, and, lying naked in the hot afternoon with Nuan, his sleeping mat soaked through with their sweat, the only regret she occasionally felt was not experiencing more lovers before marrying Apai.

His tiger gazed down on them from the ridge above Aek. She had come to witness this moment, or to protect him, or to take her revenge. As it truly happened that morning five months ago, she covered half the distance between herself and Apai before he could exhale. That he involuntarily pulled the trigger at all, let alone stopped her with a single shot, utterly shocked him. With the animal laid out before him, her legs pointing backwards as if she had been dragged across the forest floor by her nose, Apai felt terrifyingly alone, with no one to steady his shaking limbs. It was as if events had mistakenly outrun their rightful course, as if fate had bolted from his grasp and left him there with that inexplicable, majestic, incongruous being; that shock of

orange and white in a landscape that was only shades of brown. Everything felt contingent, accidental, wrong. Now she was here again; she had come to drink.

The lifeless mule, though still floating on its side, had already been pulled into the flow of the river, its progress slowed but not fully halted by rocks and debris. Apai splashed through the current, straining to reach them. In some places his feet did not touch bottom. He felt a rope against his leg and pulled on it desperately, propelling him closer and into deeper water. He saw the contents of a basket floating away. The river drew him closer to Aek but he was singularly focused on Little Bear's basket, still jutting into the air, horizontal, attached to Namwan's left side, blood-soaked clumps of raw cotton sagging through the basket's holes. He hadn't seen Little Bear fall out at any point and he clung to the belief that he would find her there.

The rush of water grew louder. The mule snagged on a massive felled tree and as he reached her another bullet tore open her flank. The ropes attached to her wooden saddle had become alarmingly tangled around him. One of her hooves pressed into his gut. He tugged hard on the bloody basket and shook off its top but still he couldn't see inside. He reached into it. Little Bear's soft leg was so cold to the touch that he had to feel it kick twice before he believed she was alive.

Little Bear was still swaddled to her bamboo cradleboard and if Apai hadn't felt the ropes closing more tightly around him and if he wasn't suddenly—now that the baby was in his hands—acutely aware that Aek would not miss forever, that one of his shots would soon meet the back of his head, he would have kissed his girl. Remarkably, she wasn't crying. She shook her head at the water droplets from the rushing river that sprayed up and tickled her nose but beyond that she seemed more interested in the clear view of the misty, grey sky above them.

Almost as soon as Apai had Little Bear in his hands his foot slipped off the rock that

braced him and he spun loose from his place on it. The current wedged him under the log so that it was all he could do to hold Little Bear above the water. Struggling up for a breath he saw Aek much closer now, taking aim, and Apai considered for a moment pulling Little Bear under with him and trying to swim away—he might as well have been holding his baby up for target practice and he had no doubt that Aek would delight in that game. He swung Little Bear toward the center of the river but kept her above water while he struggled to rise for a breath. Another shot blew a patch of bark off the log and then, in the midst of a voracious breath, glimpsed in the sunlit world above the surface—dappled branches and leafstems bowing toward him like a million half-hearted hands—something he could not trust: a chunk of flesh flying off Aek's neck at the Adam's apple. He slipped back under.

Still holding Little Bear, unsure if her head was above water, he reached for his machete on his belt to free himself from the tangle. There was rope everywhere now, parts of it biting into his leg. The familiar redwood handle of his knife felt secure in his palm until its blade turned flat against the current and the river yanked it away. His breath, too, was being stolen—he could feel his lungs on the verge of seizing. In his panic he wondered if the bamboo cradleboard would float. Less than a thought, a kind of involuntary grasping: the question of whether there was any way the baby could survive the falls, and if so, would there be anyone alive at the bottom to receive her.

For the first week or so that they started to see each other they made love every evening. Nuan had been courteous in one particular respect: without being asked, he was careful not to ejaculate in her body. Then, on the last night before Apai returned from the caravan, without any warning, Nuan finished without pulling out. He made no pretense that it was an accident.

"It doesn't matter anyway, does it?" he said when she pointed out what he had done. He was looking at her with his same confident smile, but the inflection had shifted slightly, at least as it registered with her. His body felt heavy above her; she became aware of a pinching where his knee rested against her leg.

"I…I don't know," she said, her insides scorched with shame. In that moment, though, as if she had absorbed the supernatural skills of the future-seer, as if Nuan's presumption somehow made it true, she realized that she did know, that she had known all along. The waters of her heart felt like they were being diverted, instantly and thoroughly, so that the sadness poured into parts of her that had remained packed and dry; it pooled in her fingertips and at the back of her heels. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, but it was powerful, and even then when its coursing was at its strongest she also felt murmur of an opportunity, new possibilities that might emerge from this painful irrigation. When they saw each other again for two nights while Apai was away on a hunting excursion, Nuan did it again, both times and without hesitation. It was just another way he was clearing space on her behalf, perhaps the biggest way of all. Eventually she knew it not only as a presumption but also as a proven fact, verified by multiple conditions: it was her, not Apai, who had been infertile all along.

If her infertility bothered Nuan, he never betrayed a trace of it. Whenever they had a chance to talk—the quickest of conversations stolen when they met up on the path, at festivals or if he invented some reason to approach her house when Apai was not away—Nuan teased her that she was crushing his spirit and that she should gather her most valued items and run away with him at once. She never took it seriously; she left it lay as a running joke.

Toward the end of Apai's next caravan, she arrived in Nuan's house wearing a scarf for warmth and, underneath it, a necklace that she rarely pulled out of her clothes basket. They still

took precautions to make sure that no one disturbed them and that she was never seen, but they were less careful than they had been at first. It was one of those nights when Chanpen felt a particular tingle as she ascended his steps; as soon as she stepped inside Nuan's door she was face to face with him, and he kissed her deeply while pressing her against the wall. She hadn't even had time to take off her scarf. Her cheeks were flush from her hurried walk and from the night air that had chilled earlier in the season than usual.

The kiss had especially touched her. Without removing her arms from his neck, she said, "I don't want to do it, but if I did, would you go away with me? Tonight, even, or the next?"

Nuan smiled like he had been given an innocuous compliment. He pressed her back against the wall and kissed her deeply again.

"Why not?" he said. "One place is as good as another."

She knew he only felt comfortable saying this because she had begun by giving him an out—that she would never really want to do it and she couldn't help hearing his reply as "one *person* is as good as another," that he could be honest in saying he wanted her because she would never have the courage to ask him if he could want *only* her.

"I know where he buries his silver," she said impulsively.

"My sweet little mouse talks like a lion," he said.

"I am neither a mouse or a lion," she said, "but I *am* a woman who knows what she wants."

"A woman who wants to make me a thief?"

He smiled then, and kissed her, and though their kiss no longer stirred the same elation in her that it had just moments before, it was still a passionate. The brief shade of disagreement had been successfully swept away and they made love as they had become accustomed. She never

asked him if, when he referred to theft, he was talking about Apai's silver or his wife.

With his free hand Apai pulled himself toward Namwan's corpse. Desperately, he managed to lift himself out of the water, his cheek resting on her bloody flank while he gasped for air. The boulder against which the fallen log had stuck protruded several feet out of the water, its top mossy but dry. With his body closer to the wooden saddle the tangle of rope loosened enough for Apai to shake free of it. Hoisting himself further up on the dead mule, he reached for the boulder and placed—tossed, nearly—Little Bear on top of it. With a knee on the log and his other leg nearly standing on the mule, he tried to boost himself onto the rock as well, when Namwan's body slipped under the log and he went back into the river.

Halfway to the falls, he swam for another boulder, the current picking up dramatically so that he found himself not swimming at all but merely attempting to guide his trajectory while the river sent him accelerating. Over a small drop he did not see coming he felt himself backwards in the air for a moment, then slamming back-first into a rock, knocking the wind out of him and sending a cracking pain through the back of his skull. His vision narrowed to a pinhole of light but he continued to flail his arms in the direction he thought was the shore and then he was in flat, smooth waters, the riverbank visible again but the flat, featureless sky much closer, closing swiftly upon him, its dirty white melting up from the horizon of the waterfall with its own dirty white murmur like a thinking thing, waiting, even, for ages, as if it had a long-standing purpose that it knew it was about to fulfill. With every passing instant growing louder about it, more frenzied. He should have been dead, not the tiger. He was dead, perhaps. This struggle against the current, this blur of adrenaline, this out-of-body experience that some would surely say was the fullest expression of being alive—this, perhaps, was what it felt like to be a ghost.

The riverbank was visible and he might have seen a shock of orange standing still in the leaves above Porkball wading into the river toward Little Bear, his oversized gun sticking out awkwardly on its strap. She might have turned away and left—he might have seen the trickle of dried blood from her left eye like a rust-colored tear—even before the roar of the water came up through him like a wave, displacing all thought and feeling other than his rising terror until the sublime release when—floating effortlessly now, no longer trying to swim—he fully succumbed to the fear and the not knowing what awaited him on the other side.

Over time, and most acutely when Apai was away, she came to the simple realization that she could be happy alone. Whereas in the past the old trader's visits to the salt well square brought her delight in the potential of some new item to discover, she no longer coveted anything he carried. Walking home, each old stump or weathered fence carried some association for her, some reminder of past frustration or pain. Her desire to add to these monuments by building a more permanent house began to slowly dissipate, not leaving her entirely but leaving a much smaller footprint on her daily preoccupations. The Buddhists, she thought, are right to say life is suffering. Or is it that only a certain kind of life is suffering? Are we too willing to let the suffering walk through the village gates? Could we trick it with something else besides totems of string and wood—by making, for instance, the opposite choice at every turn than the one we're expected to make? What would such a life look like, and what would it lead to? Increasingly, there was a part of her that wanted to find out. She enjoyed aspects of the company of Apai and Nuan but she didn't *need* it.

At least, that was, until Nuan stopped putting out his yellow flag. When doors close, they don't slam; they shut quietly, almost imperceptibly, blown shut by the wind without anyone

noticing until some time has passed.

Apai was gone on his latest caravan, the one he promised would be his last, though that promise was nothing new and she put no stock in it. They were supposed to have been home several days ago, and though this meant they could arrive at any time, she decided to walk over Nuan's, taking the main path this time, to pay a normal visit.

Nuan appeared startled, though as usual he let little of it show. He was seated on his mat, a glass of rice whiskey in front of him, waiting for Bok to bring his dinner. Chanpen heard the boy preparing the food on the back veranda.

"An honored guest!" He sat back in a posture of comfortable satisfaction. "Have you eaten yet?" He called to Bok to prepare an extra plate.

She stood still for a beat, then sat down opposite Nuan. She forced herself to make eye contact and sustain it.

"You have been busy?" she said.

"Not more than usual, no," he said.

"A squirrel stole your yellow flag?"

He smiled widely at this.

"You have changed since we started spending time together," he said. "In the past you would not have been so direct."

"I had not thought about it, but you have changed too," she said.

"Have I become as salty as you?" he said. "I take that back. You've always had a saltiness about you. Something I like."

Because their language did not distinguish between past and present with the tense of its verbs, she said, "'Like'? Or 'liked'?"

"I liked it then," he said. "I admire it now."

"And what do you do with the things you admire?"

Bok came in carrying a basket of sticky rice, a plate of sautéed greens, and what looked like a sparsely seasoned laab. A few sad sprigs of browning mint poked out from a pile of coarsely chopped meat. The greens were wilted to mush.

"Thank you," Chanpen said, expecting him to go away and leave her in private with Nuan. Instead, Bok sat down so close to Nuan that, with their legs folded and feet tucked under opposite legs, their knees almost touched. Nuan removed the lid from the sticky rice basket and, rather than serving Chanpen first, spooned a serving of each dish onto his plate. Bok balled a pinch of rice for himself and dipped it into the semi-raw juice of the laab on Nuan's plate. A drop fell from his fingers and he leaned over Nuan's leg so that it could fall back to the plate that, Chanpen realized, they shared.

"Please, help yourself," Nuan said, gesturing to the rice.

Chanpen looked to the side, where Nuan kept his sleeping mat.

Nuan and Bok were fully sharing his plate now, nudging the best morsels of meat to each other, spooning more greens for the other person.

"Putting food on your plate rather than sharing from the main bowl," Chanpen said. "Is this a style you learned when you were in the city?"

Nuan kept his attention on dinner. He ate as if he hadn't had a meal in days. Eventually, he said, "You asked me a question before. I forget what it was."

"So do I," Chanpen said. His sleeping area was as neat as it had always been, remarkable for a man who lived alone. Her plate remained untouched by food.

"Oh no, I remember. What do I do with the things I admire?"

She looked back at him now, and at Bok. He was a simple boy, older than his thin frame appeared from afar. He acted completely oblivious to her presence and he, too, ate with utter absorption in the act.

"I keep them around," Nuan said.

She reached out for a drink, forgetting that he had never offered her a glass of water in the first place.

He registered the crackling of a fire. The babbling of gentle water in the distance. The clinking of a spoon scraping out a pot.

Most of the voices were foreign to him—neither a timber nor a dialect he recognized before. Opening his eyes, a collection of figures around the fire, arms and legs and torsos and heads wrapped in Mien black, a curious face pausing mid-bite to notice him waking. The strangers seemed to be in a relatively good mood. From the low branches of trees near the fire hung a number of items as if to air out to dry.

One of them called out to an "elder" in Northern Thai and gestured to Apai, who felt especially heavy in his blanket, as if his body was a soaked log. He touched a sore spot on the back of his head, tried briefly to sit up but found it more difficult than expected.

The Haw appeared, a gentle look on his face.

"My comrade," he said. "Your legend grows."

Apai felt himself overcome with sorrow, remembering where he'd left Little Bear. He must have been crying, for the Haw looked away to give him privacy. Just then, a tiny humming sound snuck up on him from behind, a joyful mnum-numming.

"Here!" a familiar voice said, before coming around and squatting in front of him on the

ground where he lay. Porkball held his happy girl. “This is what you’re looking for!”

He saw slight changes in her face that felt to him more consequential than they could have been, as if she had been grown for months since he last held her, though he could have only been asleep a day or two. Her cheeks were still fat but they seemed to hang the slightest bit lower on her face now; where they pressed up to partially obscure her eyes, they obscured them less, albeit not enough that he would expect anyone else to notice. To Apai’s delight she seemed as happy to see him as he was to see her. He had the distinct impression that Little Bear not only recognized him, but missed him. For a moment he found himself wondering if she could remember what they’d been through on the river, if the danger registered with her. Did she feel fear, or something more like excitement? Did she have memories? Her eyes told him that she did, but that she was much more interested in the present moment. Or maybe, as usual, she was simply hungry.

“She loves the minnow paste,” Porkball said. “She eats it every day. She likes my recipe the best.”

With Little Bear perched on his stomach Apai tried again to sit up, but was still unable. The fire was near enough for warmth and the air was not too cool—his face felt comfortable, even warm, but even under the blanket his feet were completely numb.

“My feet are cold,” Apai said. Porkball looked at the Haw.

“Let me adjust your blankets,” the Haw said. As he squatted down, several of the unfamiliar Iu-Mien took interest from where they were.

“Can you feel that?” the Haw said.

“Feel what?” Apai said.

“I am touching your foot,” the Haw said. “Can you move it?”

The baby's presence atop his stomach forced him to contain his reaction to the panic that swept through him, made it all the more powerful, in fact, since he could not flail with his arms or attempt to thrash from side to side. He had to keep it sealed in a jar, increasing its pressure, and it mingled with the latent, residual panic of the crisis on the river that came flooding back to him unresolved. Why had Aek tried to kill him, who or what intervened, and where were the others now? Who were these Iu-Mien strangers here in their place? And then, swirling back in that same instant to the true source of his panic, was it some sort of trick of his mind or was he truly unable to move his tingling legs? If it had not been for the incongruous mushroom of joy perched on top of him—she was reaching for his ear now, taking in her little fingers a handful of his cheek—he would have felt like he had woken up in a coffin, abandoned alive.

For some reason, he thought of Liu. "Where is he?" he asked.

"You were unconscious when we pulled you from the water," the Haw said. "One man in a hundred would survive that fall." Apai strained his neck to look around the camp; they were surrounded by perhaps a dozen Iu-Mien, none of whom were Liu.

"We also retrieved most of your opium," Porkball said. "Not an easy task!"

Apai gestured to Porkball to take Little Bear and asked the Haw to help him sit up against a tree.

"Where are the others and why was Aek shooting at me?"

Porkball took the baby away and the Haw proceeded to recount what had happened at the falls. Apai's warning shot had saved the Haw's life, he told him. Upon hearing it he turned to see Aek walking back up the slope, Porkball breaking the line as well, and the men from the city, Noi, Dtom, and the Eel, confused and anxiously drawing their rifles. Liu and Toom were shot before the Haw could react, Liu with his back turned, watching Aek walk in the wrong direction.

If Porkball hadn't had a change of heart and shot Noi at close range, the Haw also would not have survived.

"He saved me too," Apai said.

"It is Little Bear, I believe, who he is most proud of saving." She was on his lap now, receiving attention from one of the Mien. "He says he rescued her from a boulder in the river."

"They wanted the opium for themselves," Apai said. It was difficult for him to think through anything logically; every thought that wasn't about his paralysis felt like a self-betrayal to him, as if by letting his mind go elsewhere he was accepting, it, and by accepting it he was allowing it to be permanent. His toes flared. The sensation came and went in waves, on a spectrum from tingling to a burning that he could not soothe.

"How will I—" he began, but stopped.

"Liu was more observant than he appeared," the Haw said, "and had a bad feeling from the beginning of their journey from the provincial capital to Bo Luang. Before we left Saeng Tong he asked relatives from a Mien village a day's journey from there to follow behind us, in case something happened—he ran on the trail at night to get back to us in time that morning. These men carried you to this spot and they will carry you back to Bo Luang. They are amazed that you lived and I have told them you were a friend to Liu. They carry his body as well, for a proper burial in his village."

It was so much for Apai to absorb—the miracle of Little Bear perfectly unharmed; his own survival, which his rational mind understood to also be something to be grateful for in the face others' death, but the bulk of his heart could only dwell on how Chanpen would react. There was always some risk bringing Little Bear home. He had known this. In his daydreams he carried it off with an air of triumph, striding confidently to her and presenting the baby as the world's

most unexpected and valuable gift. How he could do that now he could not fathom. From what position, even, would he present? A banana leaf on the ground?

"I know this is not what you are thinking about now," the Haw said, pausing for Apai's attention. "You have more than tripled your share. Even after giving something to the Mien, you are a rich man in your village." The Haw could see that this was little consolation to Apai. "I will get you some water," he said, standing up.

Porkball's amusement at his play with Little Bear sounded at once genuinely spontaneous and also performed for her benefit, to keep her entertained and in a good mood. He bounced her on his knee and they were passing something back and forth with a young Mien. Porkball helped her move her arm and open her fist to drop the object in her other companion's palm. The Mien boy put it into his mouth and let it hang over his lower lip like a tiger's tooth, growling and poking her belly. Little Bear loved the game, her face the color of a rose apple from laughing, almost losing her breath. Apai's own love, pride, regret, apprehension, and the thinnest threads of hope braided themselves together into a tight cord in his throat as the irony of his situation sunk in: whereas he thought he was saving Little Bear, it was only her, with her good-natured spirit and stately, magnetic aura, who had any chance of saving him.

When the Mien clapped and Little Bear clapped in response, Porkball's loud, rat-a-tat laugh carried over the campsite again, up into the canopy above them, where other animals made their calls too—cicadas, mostly, but also, in the far distance, gibbons whooping their songs to each other. Despite the chaos and energy of the monkeys' collective call, the high-pitched wooing and hooting like bubbles of sound rising and popping on the surface of a great, green, leafy lake, Apai had found the noise comforting since he was a boy. His mother, though she only ever spoke Lua at home, told the old tale based on the similarity of the sound of the gibbon call

to the Thai word for husband. “Calling their husbands,” his mother used to say. It made him wonder about the male monkeys, and men in general: where and why they wandered away, why they needed calling home, whether they had gotten lost on the way. And what happened when they arrived—if there was any anger in those calls, any feeling of betrayal, or if the wives were as warm and welcoming on one day as the next, if they simply found pleasure in singing out the daily routine.

Four Mien carried him on a bamboo platform that they had lashed together on the first day the Haw pulled him from the river beneath the falls. They carried Liu’s body on one too, covered by a blanket and bringing up the rear. When the wind shifted, the beginnings of an unpleasant odor reminded them of his presence.

Because he spent so much time staring into the sky, rather than in front of him, it was harder for him to estimate how much time passed from one point in the journey back to Bo Luang to the next. He would often think he recognized their location from the tops of the trees only to look to his side and realize he was wrong. At times he became dizzy. He closed his eyes for much of the time but was not inclined to sleep—his mind skipped from one unpleasant revelation to another, circling back to previous thoughts when it had a moment of stillness. The long list of things Apai would no longer be able to do for himself if he did not heal came to him gradually but steadily, so that each hour of their trek brought a new, terrible realization: not merely hunting or trekking that he could no longer do, not only working in the fields, but getting in and out of bed. He could tell when he had a full bladder but even that did not feel the same to him anymore, to say nothing of the assistance he needed to relieve himself, or how he would do it if he was left alone inside. Which was worse, he did not know: the shame of soiling himself, or

the idea that, for the rest of his life, wherever he relieved himself there would be another person present. Could such a man remain remotely attractive to a woman?

At the branch of the path that led to Liu's village, eight of the Mien said their goodbyes to take Liu's body directly home. Four of them stayed with Apai, the Haw, and Porkball to help carry Apai the rest of the way to Bo Luang.

Their strange procession piqued the interest of not a few onlookers when they passed through the center of the village, with Apai being carried like a ragged prince on a palanquin. A few children and curious men and women followed at a distance, asking questions of themselves but barely any of the returning travelers. Porkball took all the mules but Blue Star, along with the dogs, to be watered and fed by the salt huts, while Apai, the Mien who carried him, and the Haw continued on. By the time they exited the main part of the village a small group had formed. It stopped respectfully when they turned off the main path toward Apai's house but continued to stare and murmur about what might have befallen the tiger-killer.

Before he could see her, Apai tried to ascertain whether there was any emotion in the force and rhythm in the familiar "plunk plunk" of the rice husker. If there was, it was neither happiness nor sadness—determination, maybe, or resignation. As the house came into view he saw her next to it, immersed in the solitude of her work. He was right: he could not speak to her, and she didn't approach him where they lowered his platform to the ground, surrounded as he was by unfamiliar-looking men. The Haw stepped forward to greet her, sitting and talking with her lowly.

If Apai would not get up and walk to her then something peculiar was afoot, something to be wary of. He looked like a different person, not only thinner but smaller, shrunken somehow.

But whereas in the past the Haw's mere approach unnerved her, this time she felt gentleness in it. He looked at her with understated respect, like a long-time co-conspirator. She spoke first.

"You were supposed to be home almost a week ago."

"We encountered several difficulties."

"Why does my husband not approach? Does he have some complaint about me?" She did not know how it could be but she felt acutely that he had learned of her infidelity and was here with these men to confront her.

"He does not," the Haw said. "Can we sit?"

A strange sound came from the group. A bird, she thought, that sounded exactly like a cranky baby. She brushed the rice dust off two stools and they sat.

The Haw explained how they had been attacked by bandits—a story they had settled on to protect Porkball, should word of his betrayal ever get back to the provincial capital. He told her of the height from which Apai was sent over the falls, how improbable his survival. He used no ambiguous words in describing his injuries, and his personal opinion, though he was no doctor, that he would not walk again.

Chanpen was staring at the husks of rice that had fallen to the ground around the stone bowl of the husker, the chickens that were jostling for access to them. When she looked up, two men were lifting Apai up from the ground to lean him against the narrow trunk of the papaya tree that they had planted together on the day they began building their bamboo house, not long after they were married. She could look back on the memory of those two people with fondness and feel moved because there was no measure of the present in it: she recognized them but no longer knew them; that woman was no longer her and he was no longer that man.

"I think he feels ashamed," the Haw said. "Afraid you will not want to take care of him."

At about the same moment, Nuan came walking up their path with the village headman and two others, greeting the Mien warmly, as if they were expected guests. He reached out his arms to the young Mien who, she realized, did in fact hold a baby. He handed it to Nuan. They appeared to be doing their best to communicate through the Miens' limited facility with northern Thai.

"There is something else," the Haw said, "that I think he would like to tell you himself. Would you walk with me to welcome him home?" He stood and held out his hand, which was, for all of his rough edges, surprisingly soft.

She brushed the rice dust off her legs, gathered her hair more tightly under her headscarf, and looked back at her husband. The young Mien was handing him the baby now, and when it reached his arms he kissed it like his own. Nuan stared at her from behind the Mien with a look of intense curiosity, even gratification. Apai was seated not far away across the yard but the distance felt daunting to her somehow, a walk much longer than the steps it took to make it. She found herself leaning on the Haw's arm until she steadied herself, and then when she looked up again Apai had turned the baby so that both of them faced her, the baby standing on his lap, arms in the air, hands in her husband's. He was staring at her too, with all the dignity he could muster, chin raised high to see over the baby's head but also, she realized as she got closer, to keep himself from bursting into tears. She wasn't ready to feel the same, not yet, but she kept walking toward him under all of those fascinated eyes, toward her husband who was, as she had found herself doing so often for him in the past, waiting.

SOUTH

Here, Where We Can Be Honest

My Dear Mahadee,

What Rusmee said is true. But do not be angry with Rusmee, my son, and do not feel ashamed of your mother. You must understand that I have good reasons for the choices I have made. I will try to answer your questions with the honesty you request and a cooler heart than you showed to me in your letter.

No, I do not always sleep alone in our house. Many nights, I ask the neighbor children to sleep here because I am lonely and afraid. The children like it here and their mothers are happy to let them stay, because here they do not have to share a bed with two or three brothers or sisters. They can stretch their arms and legs. They spread them out like water bugs, and when they laugh to each other into their pillows it does not keep me awake. It pushes away the night and helps me fall asleep.

And yes, there is a man who comes to check on me because I am alone. He is a policeman from the north. Sometimes he brings me something from the city, though I tell him I have no use for fancy gifts. But he also helps me to repair the things I cannot fix myself. He does these things and is not bothered when Rusmee's brother and the other neighbor men all leave when he drives up in his pickup truck, even though he does not dress like a policeman and his

truck is not painted brown and white. They may say that I should not trust him, but what way do I have of knowing? They say that he is no Muslim, as he claims, because he has a large mole on his cheek with several lucky whiskers, but no beard. Who but God can know the real content of his prayers? Perhaps if you do choose to come home for a visit you will decide for yourself. But it is not so easy for me to say no to his help. And so, yes, on several nights I have allowed him to sleep in the sitting room when he is working late and too tired to drive the long distance home.

You have always been a boy who asks questions, so it should not surprise me that you push me with so many questions now. I can see that university is good for your mind and it makes me happy to know that you are progressing in your studies and learning about, as you say, history and justice. But I would prefer that you learn a skill you can use when you graduate. Abidin was always so tired from his labor when he came back from Malaysia. Still, he helped with the housework, with the rubber tapping and rice planting. He was a slow mover, quiet and obedient. You are not quiet like him, but I pray that you will continue to listen to your mother and trust that although I do not always make you proud, I have some idea about what path is good for you. Perhaps you were too young to remember how your brother used to say that the engineers who gave the orders on the construction sites in Malaysia were no smarter than he and not nearly as skilled at fixing things as your father. You are as smart as Abidin and you can be an engineer if you do not think too much or let your mind fill with too many questions that do not have to do with your studies.

Yet you ask me to tell you what I remember from the day of the demonstration. I would refuse, as I have refused in the past. I have prayed every night for years to be relieved of these memories, and God does not listen. Or, at least, that is what I used to believe. I have read your letter again and again since I opened it three days ago, and this morning while getting out some

khanom maw kaeng for the neighbor children, I had a change of heart.

Because my khanom is their favorite, and they never get it in their house, I do not show the children how much it hurts me to taste it, even to smell the sweet custard as I stir it in the bowl, or the slivers of shallot as I fry them in the pan. Doing so puts me back in that day you ask me to tell you about, at the morning meal when it is still dark out, when the cows and the chickens are still asleep but the cicadas and crickets are making their calls and the moon is so bright I do not even need the electric light to see. Now, when I feed the children the custard they love so much, I may as well be feeding it to your father, so clearly can I see his thick eyebrows rise to greet the piece I set before him that morning after we had finished the rest of our suhoor. He always woke at the same time on Ramadan, but he woke more easily when he knew there was khanom maw kaeng to be served. And so I match my smile to the children's smiles when I serve them and I turn away until they are finished.

Why, my son, does it hurt you to hear about my loneliness? Because I know that it does, even if I cannot see your face, so many provinces away in Bangkok. With such noise, so many people all around you, you too may feel alone in a way that even I cannot understand. I hope this is not true. You have Rusmee. Keep him as a friend if only because he is someone you have known from childhood who understands what it was like to grow up in Tak Bai. I hope that the crowds and roads and tall city buildings also help to distract you from your anger. For you say that you are angry with Rusmee for what he said about my life here, but I know that you are angry with me. There may be little I can do to calm your heart and so instead I will try to leave nothing out, as you have requested.

What came to me this morning while serving the custard was that I am wrong to think that God is not listening. He must want me to remember that day. Why else would my memories

of that morning be so clear, and disturb my mind so often? I can only think that for reasons I do not understand He wants you to know that day through me. It saddens me to think that you must receive your mother's pain, but if it can help you with your studies, if it can help you to stop asking questions about history and justice and bring you closer to God and practical life, to sciences that will keep you thinking about the future rather than the past, then I am willing to keep nothing hidden, as you say. But you must forgive me if I do not go straight to the most difficult parts. When I think about the events they lead to others that came before them, until I find I have traveled much further back in time for reasons that are not always clear to me.

For instance, I continue to think about how difficult it was when you refused to masuk Jawi. I knew that even if you did it the next year, it would be harder for you to marry the best girls in the village, to get respect when you went to the market to buy things for me, to keep your group of friends. I was also afraid it would set you back in ways I could not anticipate. Still, my heart was too soft to insist.

I know Abidin told you stories that made you frightened about circumcision, but in this you were no different than any other boy in the village. As adults we do not always know what stories children tell each other, but we were once children too, and the stories do not change much from year to year. Beyond the immediate fear of the pain and of whatever other silly dangers you were warned of, you were always an intensely modest boy. Do you remember, I wonder, the time that Aunt Hanisah and I wanted to give you and Amay a bath in her kitchen? Amay accepted his bath with joy. He loved being the center of attention of your aunts and cousins. Though you were hardly old enough to speak, you cried before I could even put you in the basin. You clung to my kurung, buried your face in it, and would not let go. You made such a fuss that your cousin became upset too. Your aunts and cousins left the room, and only then did

you allow me to wash you in the basin. Later, when you were seven or eight, you asked me while I was preparing dinner if the imam could come to our home and perform the circumcision in private, rather than together in the same room at the school with the other boys in the village.

You will not remember these things as clearly as I do. But though you were stubborn, I understood that you had my soft heart, too. Even before I had sons I always imagined that it would be humiliating to be a boy in our religion. Your father disagreed. He said that becoming a man was a proud moment for any boy. I do not know why I should have such sympathy for boys when the evidence of a girl's womanhood is so much more conspicuous. But a girl will speak more with her mother, sister, cousins, or aunts. When she becomes a woman, she is less alone with her body. A boy could keep secret his nighttime emission for many months without anyone noticing. When you insisted on washing your own clothes, your father wanted me to take your dirty clothes and pick through them for the evidence that you had passed into maturity. He said that your time was better spent collecting rubber sap and repairing the collection bowls than washing clothes. Like a woman, he said. I refused, and what is more I forbade him to go through your clothes himself. This is why, long after other boys your age had already begun to take their place as adults beside their fathers at the mosque, you remained at home, a diligent and welcome help to me, but an embarrassment to your father, who had prayed your fondness for the singing doves was a sign that you would one day follow him as one of the muezzins at the mosque. He never encouraged Abidin to learn to sing the call to prayer, but he was eager for the day when you would have your masuk Jawi ceremony and begin to join him in this way.

If your father was harder on you—and you are right, he was harder, despite what I have said all these years—if he was harder on you it was—

I must begin again. I crossed out those words because I am not sure if they are right. That

is one problem with trying to answer questions like yours. In writing I grab for an answer to put one thing in front of another, to make the past more clear to you, or to us both, but I could just as easily have grabbed something else. I can tell you I will speak the truth, but I am not sure if this is the thing that is true or if it is the opposite. I may be simply choosing the explanations that I think will make you feel that you have gained something from me that I did not want to give you, so that I can satisfy your curiosity and bring it to an end.

You expect me to say that he was harder on you because he saw more potential in you. It was partly that, but not only that. I often wonder if I made a mistake in protecting you from pain all these years, so I will tell you that he was harder on you because he saw in you weaknesses that were not present in Abidin.

You were a serious boy who wanted to know why the Koran said what it did, but you had no patience for memorizing it. Your father could have brought you to the haji at the ponoh to be sure that you received the most correct answers to your questions, but what you did not know—so how could you understand—is that it was the simple memorizing of the Koran that gave your father his steadiness and clear mind. Everything one needed to know about your father could be heard in the music of his deep voice. He surrendered to each whole verse, not breaking them up into pieces or making them an idea. In the morning, while you dreamt the elaborate dreams that you would recount to me in the kitchen, he had long ago been the first person to wake, always within five minutes of the time he intended. You ignored him when he told you to recite the duas 21 times before sleep, the basmallah 41 times, after asking God to wake you up at the proper hour. You saw it as yet more empty advice. Lying in bed, he would tell me in a low voice that it was not exactly correct to say that he asked God to help him wake up. Rather, he made a promise to God that he would. He put himself under scrutiny, made himself accountable.

When he said the 21 duas he went into a kind of trance. I could not take him out of it if I tried. Upon reaching the final one he would stop halfway, and his sleep as I felt it next to me was so sewn through with a sense of peace, like a solid thing I could touch, that I believed him when he told me that he continued to repeat the passage in his sleeping mind through the night, and in the moments the next morning when he was coming out of sleep, his mind, not even fully aware yet, would continue the recitation of the dua at the very word where he had left off the night before. Upon reciting the final word of the passage he was fully awake, awake as he had been at the height of the day before, and it would always be within five minutes of the time he had promised to rise. He would put on his watch, but he never had to look at it. He already knew the time.

You did not live your life as wakefully as your father. Abidin moved slowly but he, too, was more awake to the truest essence of things, an awareness that can only come from the difficult work of remaining completely alone with God and your thoughts, of surrendering to Him and recognizing the many ways that our own minds betray us. Abidin accepted his dependence on God like a fisherman casting heavy things over the side of a full boat. You may roll your eyes at my comparisons. The fervor of my language may seem uneducated to you. What I am trying to say is that though you were quick to speak and always very clever, you were content to remain only half-committed to your life.

If you feel I go too far with my honesty, you have my permission to tear this letter and throw it away. You say your father was more of a friend to Abidin than to you, and again, I admit that you may be right. Though I cannot speak for your father now, I can choose to believe that as you got older your relationship would have grown to include more of the familiarity of equals. But you must not forget how you were. Or perhaps you never saw it. Your father was

afraid for you. Without him to make you focus, what kind of man would you have become? You did not need another friend. You needed a man to show you where to devote your will. Abidin's job was building houses, and he always came back with enough money to pay for extra things: uniforms, your zebra doves, even repairs to our home. Your father's job was being your father, making sure that you could take care of yourself.

That is why he became so angry the day he caught you opening the refrigerator on Ramadan. You acted injured. "I am only reminding myself of what I have to look forward to at sunset," you argued, before he whipped you with the stick. Or perhaps you did not say that then. Perhaps you said it when I found you in your room sobbing into your pillow, rocking from side to side as if you were lying on very hot stone. Perhaps—I think this is more likely now—you simply stared at your father with that look of yours. Perhaps he was not going to beat you until he saw you looking at him like that, without fear. My son, if you tell me that you did not intend to let any food pass your lips I believe you, but you must admit that you knew you should not have been near the pantry, that even if you did not feed your body you were feeding your curiosity and imagination, that the refrigerator, closed for the whole day, must have surrendered the strong smells of budu and stirred durian it had kept since the early hours of the morning when we put those dishes away. You must have taken those scents into your nose and let them linger in your throat. Even if you were doing all of this for no other reason than to make the discomfort of fasting more acute than it already was, if you were making your mouth water not to wet your dry throat but to stoke your hunger and increase your sacrifice, you must have known what an affront this was to your father's ways. He stood guard at the gates of his mind—no, that is not right. If I must make another comparison, I will say that he conditioned his mind so that it remained like the surface of a calm pond, flat and unbroken. This kind of mind did not come easily to him. He

worked at it in his daily prayers. At night after iftar when the building of the neighbor's house would again commence, even then, holding a hammer or a saw in the light cast by a motor-scooter's headlamp, his movements remained within himself. Does what I describe make sense to you? Do you know what it means to remain within yourself? How, then, was your father to handle your habit of making things more difficult than necessary? The way you let your mind pull you along like it was a disobedient animal? You may have believed that your mind was taking you in good directions. You may well have been correct. But you should have known that in our house, in our part of this country, we do not have that luxury. Those who want to flee Patani are trapped inside their own doors. Those who want to stay can never be at ease. This is where the history and justice come in, my son. Even before your courses you learned enough here at home to know that the two groups I describe above, those who want to stay and those who want to flee, are one in the same. This is what it means to be Jawi.

Because a mother knows her son, I was not surprised when you refused to join the masuk Jawi ceremony with the other boys your age that year. But it never occurred to your father that a son could disobey him in this way, and you should have told him yourself. Instead, you left it to me. It was not enough to stare into your breakfast that morning and tell me only that you "were not ready," to sneak off and take the songthaew to your cousin's in Yarang while your father was helping your uncle to press and hang his rubber. By running away, you did not even give him a chance to shout at you when he was most angry. It was his responsibility as a father to whip you, and you prevented him from performing that obligation.

Waiting for your father to come home on the day you ran away, I was too nervous to watch TV, so I took up the broom and re-swept the clean floor. I started to sing an old lullaby to distract myself when I heard him come in. He bathed and said his evening prayers before asking

where you were. “How long does it take to carry water to two old cows?” he asked. He must have felt that something wasn’t right, seen it in my own face, though I tried my very best to keep a calm and soothing expression.

He asked me why I was singing such a strange song. As a joke, he asked if I was pregnant again. Of course it would have been impossible at that time, I was too old, and the idea should have made me laugh, but something tired in his voice made the comment sound harsh to me. Abidin had been gone for nearly three months, it was his first time away, we both worried about him though we never used that word. I blurted out to him that you did not want to masuk Jawi. I tried to make it seem natural, nothing to be concerned about, but we both knew that you had refused your father’s command.

How can I forget the combination of vulnerability and fury in his eyes when he asked me what I meant? Repeating it, I felt I was betraying someone—you or him or God, I do not know. After what felt like a very long time, he looked at the calendar we kept on the wall and let out a laugh. “Not ready,” he said, laughing again with no real happiness in it. “A boy does not choose when he is ready. Where is he?”

You should have told him yourself. Instead, I watched in sorrow as he took the rattan stick to the field and tied the cow that had wandered too far and beat its hide until it bled. The exclamations your father made with each stroke carried across the field, as if he was receiving his own blows.

We ate in silence that night. After, your father went immediately to his bed. By the time your uncle brought you back on his moto the next morning, a dove cage in each of your hands and a small bag of clothes, your father had decided that the best path was to ignore you, at least until his temper cooled enough to speak. As you know, it never did.

I regret not doing something more to prevent your decision not to masuk Jawi, even though I would be blind to not acknowledge that it may have saved your life.

You were so young, and I did not fully understand what your decision would mean for you and your father, both. As other boys rode on the backs of their fathers' motor-scooters on Fridays, as your father and Abidin went off without you, you sat silently digging in the garden for grubs, tending to your doves. Neighbors asked what was wrong with you, as if you had caught some disease by drinking from a bad well.

You ask me to tell you about the day of the protest. Abidin had come home from Malaysia. Your father woke at 2 a.m., as he always did during Ramadan. Then he woke me, sounding as alert as if he hadn't even slept. As I did every day, I shuffled to the kitchen to begin making the suhoor. He disappeared outside. I never knew what he did out there in the dark. When I asked him, he would say he was "checking on things," but there was nothing to check on but a few yard chickens, a cat, and the rabbits. Your birds, like you and your brother, were still asleep. If you didn't wake from my noise in the kitchen, your father woke you by turning on the light. When you were young he would grab your feet, but by that time all the playfulness between you had gone. You hardly spoke. I remember everything we ate that day. I set out tom gai and bai liang soup from the night before, I boiled vegetables and made fresh budu. I did not know it yet, but it would be my last meal for several days.

After napping he woke again at 5 a.m. to go to the mosque. As he was putting on his baju and songkok he told you to take the cows to the field. Abidin was wearing his baju melayu too, and they looked so handsome together, father and son dressed in their good clothes, that it broke my heart to see you still in your t-shirt and shorts.

Son, do you remember the morning as clearly as I do? The air thick with the smell of rain? I don't know why I can see it so well and not recall how I spent the time that your father and Abidin were in town. I do remember your face when they left you washing your clothes in my plastic tub in front of the house: curiosity, sadness perhaps, but also relief to be left for another day. In your own way, you had come to enjoy being alone.

I wasn't worried at 7 p.m. when I went into town myself to pray. You and I shared steamed pumpkin before I left. But I knew something was wrong even before I reached the mosque, by the way people were driving on the road. Teens were more reckless than usual, a look of panic on their faces mixed with a strange giddiness, an unnerving kind of excitement that I will not forget. It may be in our nature to feel excitement when terrible things happen, but it is not our best nature.

I stopped at Ma-daw's shop but found only her young daughter behind the counter. She was barely tall enough to see over it. "Where are your mother and father?" I asked, and she told me that there were loud noises like firecrackers, and soldiers had made all the men take off their shirts and lie on the ground. The poor little girl could not have been older than six or seven. Standing up straight behind the counter, she seemed frightened, but less so than I. She did not know when Ma-daw would be back. I wanted to ask her if she had seen your father or Abidin, but instead I left, so that my fear would not take hold of her too.

Outside the mosque, people were making wild claims about how many men had died. The protest happened in front of the district police station, where people gathered to call for the release of the Chaw Raw Baw Six. "The river is full of bodies," one man told me. At the district station I found a crowd of women still lingering where they had waited off to the side for hours and watched their husbands and brothers and sons stripped and laid out on the cement. The

women talked in circles, to themselves as much as each other, repeating over and over what they'd witnessed. How many trucks, what time they pulled away. There was tear gas, they said. Real bullets, not rubber. A dozen or so had been killed at the spot, but many were beaten and kicked by the soldiers as they attempted to lie down or walk to where the soldiers were pushing them. I stood there a while, listening to the same accounts repeated until eventually I was telling those accounts to others as if I had actually seen them myself, all the while terrified at not knowing where your father and Abidin might be, at not having seen anything at all.

The relatives and neighbors who gathered in our home that evening stayed until about midnight. They had more information: how most people at the protest had merely stopped to look at what the activity was about, how, by 10:30 a.m. or so, the soldiers and police and rangers were telling everyone to leave, but the streets leading from the police station were blocked, and people were hemmed in between the gates of the station in front, the river in back. In the early afternoon the soldiers and police sprayed water hoses. At three the shooting started. Some tried to escape into the river but there was nowhere to go. There were not enough trucks for all the men, so they piled them in on top of each other, in layers five or six high, like bags of rice, or swine.

After our visitors had all gone home that night, I lay down for two hours but did not sleep. You were quiet in your room. I always assumed you were able to sleep that night despite your anxiety. I was glad for that. It told me that you might live to be unhurt and unchanged if the worst came to pass. But it occurs to me now, as I write this, that I may have been wrong. You may have been lying there in the next room awake all night too, wondering how your mother could sleep at such a time.

In the morning your uncle Sa-im came from Yarang in a pickup truck with an old, rolled-

up rug in the back, orange and brown and frayed. I did not ask him what it was for. I pretended not to see it. We hardly spoke on the ride to the military camp at Inkayut. This was better for Sa-im, I think, because I am sure that someone had called him from the camp that morning to tell him that your father's face was posted on the board among the photos of the dead. Because he is kind, Sa-im never hinted that he knew what we would find there. Meanwhile, the rug with its dirty edges sat squat and lifeless behind us, swaying only when we took a curve. When we arrived at the camp and saw the wall papered with the photos of a hundred swollen faces, we realized that we had been fools. We had one old rug, but we needed two—another for my sweet Abidin.

I do not know what it was like in the trucks that day. Most of the men who were there do not talk about it. I have spoken to some wives. Sadan was shot in the stomach before being loaded on, and does not remember anything of the long journey—over six hours that should have taken two to cover that distance, according to the men. So Sadan is not only lucky to survive, he is lucky not to remember. I do not know if your father and Abidin were placed in the same truck, but no one talks of being there with them, despite the fact that many people knew him because he was a muezzin.

I asked your aunt to take you away from our house the night we brought the bodies home because I did not want you to have to see your father and brother before they had been prepared by the imam. Your uncle helped me lay out a sheet on the tile and set them both on it. I refused to leave. Instead, I sat down and looked closely at them both under the electric light. I could hardly recognize your father's face. He wore no clothes, his body had many deep bruises, and in some places his skin was already coming apart like wet bread. Only his hands and feet looked the same. Above his wrists and knees his limbs were purple-black, but his hands I held until it was

time for them to be washed as if he was about to enter the minaret.

My Abidin, however, remained unblemished. They said he suffocated in the truck. Aside from the bruises on the back of his head and neck, his skin was as soft and smooth as it had always been. I held him, and he did not smell. I closed his eyes and sat with them for nearly an hour until the imam arrived and purified them for the next life.

That, my Mahadee, is what I remember. I must also give you recent news. I am sorry to tell you that your albino dove died last week. When I found her in her cage her heart was still beating but she had been badly bitten by a rat. On the night that it happened I heard her unmistakable song more clearly and insistently than ever before. I assumed that this was because she had found new happiness, that she had been moved by the changing of the season or some other thing that only the birds can know. It troubled me the next morning to discover that what I had understood to be the sound of her joy may have actually been the terror in her cry for help.

This is the sad news. At the same time, the female zebra dove has hatched two chicks. It took almost three weeks for them to hatch, the mother and father taking turns on top of the eggs. I watched them every day, taking care not to disturb them any more than necessary while giving them seeds and water. The chicks are pale and dull but they already look strong. I would not be surprised if they leave their nest in little more than a week.

I have asked the policeman from the north to build a screen to protect this family and the other doves. He says he can do it easily. Your cousins say his hands are unclean, that he is not as kind or as gentle as he tries to appear. And, as I have said, they say he is no Muslim. I admit that there is something in this man that I, too, find unsettling, something unseeable in his soul that, on some days, makes his presence uneasy for me. I catch him glancing around at the inside of our

house with a strange mix of pity and pleasure. I do not encourage his visits, and yet he persists. I do not even smile when he appears at my door. But I am afraid. There are nights I tremble with it. The worst part is that I do not know if I fear the possibility of his unwelcome advance one day when we are alone and I am unable to protect myself, or if I fear that I might surrender to his persistence and let him live with me here, to quiet the thoughts of being alone with my other fears and with my own memories. I do not know which it is, and it torments me.

For you must continue with your studies, Mahadee, and build yourself an independent life. You may want to write with assurances that you will be here for me, that you will come back often to make me feel less alone. But you should not. I ask you not to. Instead, I must thank you, because your letter has done something important for me. Your request has forced me to see how your refusal to become a Jawi man not only saved your life by keeping you away from the protest that day, but also cost the lives of your father and your brother. What I mean is this: it is clear to me now that if you had gone with your father to the mosque he would have been more careful about going to a protest. More importantly, he would not have felt it to be his first duty all that year to show you through his actions what it means to be a Muslim, a Jawi, a man. He would have come back home that day and tended to the hole in the fence where the cow had wandered off, to the rubber pressing, to the extra rice field he agreed to help plant in order to make enough money that year to buy a field of our own. You may have never considered this possibility before, and in truth I did not see it this way until I wrote this letter. Now, I make this request: do not tell me you will come back. In every return there is the shadow of its brother, the departure. In every spoken word there is the reminder of the silence to which we are all abandoned. No, better that you remain where you are, that we keep our thoughts on paper, here where we can weigh the true meaning of words like history and justice. Here on paper, turning

them over like carved objects, we can see how they hold opposite ideas together at once. Here, my son, where we can be honest.

May you have peace,

Mother

The Rubber Tapper's Knife

The metal beds of the military trucks burned the bare chests of the men who were thrown in first, men stripped to the waist, arms bound behind their backs, laid face down in rows and stacked in layers four, five, six bodies high. Malik was added more gingerly than the others, almost kindly even, close to the top of the heap by a young soldier with a southern accent. He'd felt the drops of another brief rain. He did not need to see it to know that, outside, the concrete released steam.

And where was his nephew, Jaemu? Face down in this pile now, the cords chafing his wrists, it seemed futile to call out for him again. The man above him must have been unconscious, so fully limp and heavy did his weight press down on Malik, his slowly heaving ribs digging into the back of Malik's head. The truck had not yet left its place in front of the district police station, and below him bodies already pleaded for air. "I beg you," came a high-pitched, desperate voice. "The weight is too much." But there was nothing anyone could do.

Malik was almost never helpless. He was the equal of any rubber tapper in Tak Bai district; it did not matter that he was blind. But this day had unfolded as if in the restless dreams Malik sometimes had in the cool, dark corridors of the older part of the rubber grove, where he would doze with his back against the trunk of a tree, tapping knife sticky by his side, the cutting having been started well before dawn and finished before the morning grew too warm. He

always finished with extra time. Some days, as he rested and listened to the grove, the long rows all weeping together their thin white sap, the trickle of it filling up the bowls like a slow, silent lullaby, he woke with a start to a mosquito sting on his poorly wrapped neck, to the eerie dead air of midday and the jarring awareness that the bowls from the first trees would already be full, the sap congealing in the suffocating heat.

It had been that kind of day, a slow escalation to a startling unreality. He'd gone to town with Jaemu around 10 a.m. to pick up the cloth that Yaena would use to cut herself a new kurung for Eid. She had already chosen out the material; he only needed to retrieve it. He regretted now his insistence that Jaemu carry it in a plastic bag when they walked to the demonstration outside the district police station rather than leaving it tied to his moto at the mosque. He hated the thought that it lay discarded in some puddle where he and Jaemu fell, or under the tire of one of these trucks. It broke Yaena's heart to lose nice things to carelessness, and he trusted Ma-daw when she said this cloth was worth the expense—he had felt between his fingertips the soft fineness of the cotton. Her description of it as a bright, swirling orange and red sounded to him like the sunsets he saw as a boy with his father when he still had his sight and they would travel to Satun to help his uncle with his catch during the month that was rainiest on their own side of the peninsula. How strange that he could often "see" such things as colors with his fingers before being told? No stranger, perhaps, than the way the rain could be so relentless in Baan Nam Bo when they departed for his uncle's on those childhood mornings, the surf so grey and churning, while just a few hours later, a hundred miles across the Kra Isthmus, the fishermen floated on a sea of glass. Independent of that other reality back home on the Gulf, the long stem at the bow of their turquoise boat jutted up out of the Andaman into a liquid sky, a swirl of citrus and purples and blood.

Something dripped onto his head from above and made two trails through his hair, one sidelong toward his ear and one straight over the meridian of his skull, toward his forehead. At first he assumed it was sweat or water from the men who'd been soaked with water cannons or pulled out of the river, but what he felt creeping through his hair now was too thick to be water. It tickled his scalp despite the pressure squeezing him from all sides and despite the scene outside, the barking of the uniformed men and unofficial rangers for hire who had failed to persuade the demonstrators to disperse and then, panicking when the army's own tear gas blew back on them, cowered behind obstacles and shot blindly into the crowd. This was according to frantic descriptions by Jaemu, delivered while they clung to each other's shirts in their hiding place on the riverbank. Even in that chaos, Malik had insisted Jaemu tell him everything that was happening, before Malik tripped on someone lying on the ground and they slipped and fell and were separated.

It distracted him, that slow itch moving across his scalp, over the revving of other vehicles leaving the lot, over the increasingly urgent cries of the men lying piled underneath him, begging the others to try to stand up, to take some weight off the bodies at the bottom, the men higher up saying, "Brother, if I could I would stand, I would tear a hole in this canvas, but I can't move my legs"—even over all of this, the sensation on his scalp did not abate. Malik wanted to scratch it or wipe it away but with tied hands all he could do was rub the back of his head against the body above him. The satisfying friction he hoped to feel wasn't there. Instead, the man's skin was slippery with the same blood that was crawling toward his face. He stopped immediately, the patch of baldness on the crown of his head sticky-wet now.

At the first amplified pop of the mosque's old loudspeakers, the pile of men in the truck fell silent. The activity outside halted for a moment too. The call to the late afternoon prayer

meant that it was around 3:30. There was something unfamiliar in the voice of the muezzin as he sang his call—it had none of its usual mellifluence, none of the vocal flourishes at the end of the Arabic words, the trilling notes and half-notes. None of the usual mix of melancholy and anticipation, the resonance of pious sacrifice. There was sorrow, but it was a muted sorrow, the syllables not drawn out extravagantly as usual but flat, perfunctory, hastened through. The voice sounded older, drier. All of this he thought in the first few syllables of the call. By the end of it he knew it was the voice of the imam, not that of Rosuemai, the usual muezzin.

In the most sonorous voice he could muster, Malik sang out an answering prayer. Breaking the silence felt briefly energizing, as if his bones had been struck with a tuning fork. Men at the top of the pile followed, drawing the sound out until others, farther buried, joined with shortened breath. The melody was enough to make him briefly forget the sensation of the blood nearing his eyebrow. One man in particular extended the prayer after the others had finished. Even in its breathlessness, Malik thought he recognized the voice.

"Rosuemai?"

"Yes." He said it with no intonation of a returned question. From the distant quavering of his voice it sounded as if he were lying toward the bottom of the pile. When the prayer was over, Malik called to him, but a second guard, standing at the end of the truck and distinguished by his deep voice, gave a command to be silent, and all the men obeyed except for Rosuemai.

"My son," Rosuemai said. "Are you all right?" His voice was a thin thread. "Abidin?"

The young soldier who had helped Malik into the truck interrupted. "Elder, you cannot speak," he said.

"I'm fine, father," said Rosuemai's son, from somewhere to the left of the truck. "Where will they—" The boy's question was cut off with a sickening thud, and another.

"Shut your mouths," said the man with the deep voice.

Malik did not consider himself a pious man. He never saw the point of memorizing an entire book in a foreign language for the sound of the words alone, divorced as they were from his mother tongue of Jawi. He failed his exam on the Koran three times, the imam from another village frowning as Malik groped in vain for the first few words of the passage that followed the one the imam had recited in his perfect Arabic. The imams and hajis were the only ones who understood that language, and they liked it that way. When his father called him away from the ponoh to help with the planting, it was nothing more than a way to save face—he would have been sent home anyway.

Once or twice a year, when he had business in the provincial capital, he spent an afternoon at a secluded house outside the city where he and an old friend wagered on fighting cocks. He swore frequently, flirted with the girl who ran the mango stand by the convenience store when her mother wasn't around, flirted with her mother when she was. He had never been unfaithful to Yaena in all their years of marriage, but he still thought of himself as handsome. Women at the traveling market told him so to disarm him when he tried to bargain. Even so close to fifty he craved that attention, still let himself be taken by the arm so that he could smell the scent of women who were young enough to be his daughters. There was a reason women in villages covered their hair with scarves and wore loose fitting clothes, and kept their distance from the opposite sex until they were married. Piety is a learned thing. But no kurung could hide a woman's shapeliness, and a headscarf only framed and further accentuated the most symmetrical faces, of which he had seen many in his youth, before the sudden, sharp pains in his eyes, the aching in his temples, the otherworldly halos around electric lights and the moon. Before his corneas, too, became their own foggy silver-blue moons. No, there were devoted

Muslims in this part of the world but they would never adopt the ways of Arabs, whose women cover themselves in black from head to toe. Here, life was too sweet for that.

His thirst was a desperate vacuum in his chest. Yaena had told him to stay away from the demonstration. Standing at the end of the path, she stopped them and grabbed his arm where he sat on the back of Jaemu's moto and scolded him so that he could feel her breath on his cheek. He always smiled in the face of her exasperated tone. After all these years, it still retained its hints of tender playfulness. It still sounded to him like love. Her insistent grip on his collar was a caress.

The bodies were pressed so tightly together that he could feel one straining through another. "Uncle," the young man underneath him said, "can you shift your weight to the left?" He did what he could, but he could not bring himself to ask the man's name or where he was from or what he had seen that afternoon. "Have you seen my nephew?" he had asked earlier to the group, but when no one had, he ceased to try to converse, choosing instead to conserve his energy. It seemed that the others were doing the same, aside from those on the bottom who drifted in and out of fits of sighing. The man on his right whispered something in his ear that he could not understand. It was soft and intimate and senseless, like a quiet hallucination.

Nothing had passed his lips that day, for it was Ramadan, but as the blood crept further down his face—across his left cheek and alongside his nose—he fixed in his mind a terrible possibility: eventually the blood would reach his lips, and opening them would mean a breaking of the obligation of the day. Though he had cheated the fast many times in his life, what was at stake for him now was something more fundamental than piety—difficult to name, but much more urgent. He felt determined not to break the fast in such a gruesome way. The blood reached his nostril and the left corner of his mouth and he drew in a long breath, as if preparing to plunge

underwater. The truck lurched into gear and the whole pile briefly shifted, the sound from the engine wrapping them in a gauze of noise. At the frequent stops and starts, it was clear that the swaying of the pile gave no relief to those on the bottom; it only multiplied their suffering. They moved along country roads that Malik had long ago memorized, the blood gathering in both his nostrils and pooling between his grimly clenched lips. He could barely breathe now. He had lost his sense of time.

From his left a young man whispered, “Talk to me, old man, or I think I will die.”

He was no stranger to slaughter. He knew how to lay the cow down between two trees on Eid al-Adha and string it tight by its horns and hoofs. Many times he helped hold the animal down, calming it during the sharpening on the whetstone, the pulling taut of the long folds of white skin under the chin. The quick back and forth of the blade, the baring of teeth, the knife slipping into the hollow pockets of the neck. The kicking legs, spilled life filtering through dry leaves and dirt.

When the salty-sweetness hit his tongue, it didn’t taste like anything from a cow. It tasted opulent. His mouth watered at the sensation. It was nourishment; he wanted to vomit. Below, others already had.

“Tell me, my friend,” he said, “has the sun fallen yet?”

“Why do you ask that question? Can’t you see the space under the tarp?

“I cannot,” he said, his words slurred with blood. “I gather, then, that there is still light.”

When they finally arrived at their destination, sometime late in the night, Malik was again helped down off the truck with some consideration by the guards, the young soldier with the southern accent and the man with the deep voice. Finding it difficult to stand, Malik put his arm

around the necks of the two men. As they carried him to the edge of the bed of the truck and prepared to hand him off to others, Malik let his right palm graze against the side of the face of the man with the deep voice. He wanted to know its shape. His fingers saw a wide nose with bulbous nostrils, longer hair than a soldier, some flabbiness around the jaw and a thick mole on his cheek, out of which grew long, coarse hairs. Reaching the ground, he called to Rosuemai: "We have arrived, my friend. Our suffering is over." Rosuemai was talking to his son. And that, in retrospect, was the most peculiar thing: the words of affection between father and son, followed by what happened next.

Malik was ordered to stand off to the side while they unloaded the rest of the men and brought them to where they would be kept. They were counting them in groups of ten as they came off. When Malik felt sure that the truck must be nearly empty, he heard the voice of the young soldier drop in exclamation. A superior ordered someone to "Check them all for breathing." Then the voice of Abidin, who had always been a quiet boy, now piercing and untethered, calling to Rosuemai. There was a commotion, a sound like fish flapping on the bottom of a boat. Someone called for a doctor, but it was drowned out by Abidin's screams of concern for his father. Malik was bumped from behind as several soldiers pushed past him and voices converged on the spot; then he was ushered back some distance with the others. He heard Abidin in a guttural rage, a few voices urging calm, others excited, making sharp clucking noises like men corralling an angry bull. A struggle, the sounds of something hard striking flesh and a collective sucking in of air. Then, for what felt like minutes, the thickest silence, broken eventually by a few low sounds from the soldiers around him. "Ai kaek," the man with the deep voice said, breathless.

*

Malik sits and sleeps in a room with a cement floor. Four days and no bath.

Early one morning, the young soldier with the southern accent comes to inform Malik that he will be going home. He asks Malik if he'd like to make a call to a relative or friend. Malik follows the young soldier outside to a bench and table where there is better reception. If not for the tobacco smoke, Malik wouldn't have known anyone else was there.

"Pardon," Malik says, to the other person at the bench. "Can I have a cigarette?"

"A blind man detained by the military?" It is the man from the truck with the deep voice, whom he has come to think of as The Mole. "You must be the most dangerous cripple in the world." Rather than hand one to Malik, he tosses the pack on the table. As Malik feels for them, his fingers graze other things: a mango, a small box, a smooth stick with no bark. He puts a cigarette in his mouth and asks the man for a light. Malik sits facing outward, away from the table, while the young soldier and The Mole stand on each side.

"You're a ranger?" Malik says.

The Mole laughs. "I'm like police. You can tell I'm not a soldier?"

Malik smiles. "Where are you from? Not here."

"Not here," the Mole says. There is no more talk while Malik finishes his cigarette. He thinks The Mole will walk away from the silence, but instead he lights another one.

"What happened on our truck?" Malik says.

The Mole spits and describes an unlikely scene where men on the bottom rows, chatting with relief at the prospect of being released from the trucks, suddenly go into convulsions after being freed from the weight that had been crushing them for so many hours.

Malik was taught not to be violent, but he is not a pious man.

“Is this your mango?” Malik asks The Mole. “In that case, is there a knife to peel it?” The Mole drops something heavy in his lap. It has a brushed leather sheath, fastened around the handle with a snap.

“What do you do to support yourself?” The Mole asks.

“I am a rubber tapper.”

The Mole finds this extremely amusing.

“The equal of any tapper in the district.”

Laughing, The Mole says, “What’s your secret?”

“A very sharp knife. I depend on it like my dearest friend. Or a son.” Then, he adds, gently thumbing the blade, “Yours is sharp too.”

“That is no rubber tapper’s knife,” The Mole says.

As skillfully as the woman at the mango stand, as if it is in fact his own knife, Malik cuts off the knot where the fruit meets the stem and begins to peel from there. To the other one, the soldier, he says, “How old are you, young man? And where are you from?”

“Satun,” the boy answers. He does not give his age, but his voice sounds younger than ever, and not unkind.

Malik’s fingers flutter over the edge of the fruit where the unpeeled skin meets the wet, raw flesh. It is not unlike tapping for rubber, cutting the thinnest V-shaped strip of bark from the trunk, making sure not to cut too deep for fear of hurting the tree. In this case, the liquid that drips over his wrist is sweet juice, not sap. He raises the fruit and his knife together in both hands and catches the juice running over the base of his palm in his lips.

“How many men died?” Malik asks, in no particular direction.

The young soldier does not say anything, but The Mole says, “Seventy or eighty. They

were weak from fasting." Then, The Mole exclaims, "I thought you were a Muslim! Why are you eating fruit now?"

"Has the sun already risen?" Malik asks. He knows it has.

"About twenty minutes ago," the young soldier says. "That is what our commander says. That they were weak from fasting."

"I have a nephew about your age," Malik says to the soldier. "His name is Jaemu. Have you seen anyone with that name in the camp? From the way you speak, I imagine you would have been friends in another life."

"And you are not supposed to believe in other lives," The Mole says. "Soon I will be convinced that you are not a Muslim at all, but a proper Buddhist."

On the flickering screen of Malik's mind, the young soldier is the one more easily convinced to bring himself nearer to Malik—more ready than The Mole to believe that Malik is hard of hearing as well as blind and thus lower himself closer to Malik's ear. He is lither and therefore more inclined to bend at the waist, to jump forward out of polite nervousness to accommodate another handicap. As he sees it in his mind's eye, then, it is a sad practicality for Malik, not justice—far from justice—that makes him choose the boy as the one to draw close enough to reach the back of his neck with one hand while driving the knife deep into his windpipe.

This is what Malik imagines, but it is not what happens. What happens is more pedestrian: he scrapes the remaining meat off the mango pit with his teeth and slowly wipes both sides of the knife on his thigh before putting it back in its sheath. The young soldier asks him if he wants to make his phone call, and he thinks of Yaena, who, Malik will learn, has already sold a small piece of their rubber plantation—a newer stand, not the older part of the grove where he

likes to drift off in shade—to hire a lawyer who will help her and other families post more of their land as collateral for bail.

The following day, after two weeks apart, Yaena arrives to take him home. She comes with Jaemu, who escaped to the side of the demonstration where the women were sitting and lay behind them, covered in Yaena's new cloth, until the last soldier had left the scene.

At the funeral for Rosuemai and Abidin, the men discuss what happened on the trucks, how so many died. It is a topic of endless speculation. Some say that most of the 78 suffocated. Others insist they were executed at the camp. One young man, home from university, speaks of an "imbalance of chemicals" in the blood caused by muscles being crushed. Malik remains silent. Instead, he asks Jaemu to be with him outside the front of the house. There, they listen to a family of singing doves making their music in the late afternoon. Jaemu asks where the birds first came from, to what place they are native, but Malik is engrossed in the shiver of a glorious thought: next Friday, he and Jaemu will go to the mosque and present themselves to the imam. "Dear Imam," he will say. "God grant you peace. If it pleases you, we would like to learn the art of the call to prayer. I am not a pious man, but if it is God's will, I would like to be a muezzin."

Silhouettes

Malee, the assistant property manager, was resting her feet. Hardly had she finished attending to one phone call when she received another. She pushed her thumbs into her swollen ankles as she spoke, explaining to the person on the other end of the line exactly which beach house required the delivery of the grill and charcoal: Baan Pleng, the "Music House," where Khun Krit was entertaining guests. She explained it all without the slightest hint of stress in her voice. It was an affect, Jay thought, as he waited patiently for assistance at the counter, that could only result from living in one of the most striking settings he had ever seen.

It was always a great affair, Krit's annual party, thrown every thirteenth of April to coincide with both Songkran and Krit's own birthday. No one turned down the invitation—friends of Krit and his wife, Dao, mostly, along with several new faces every year to keep it fresh—people in Krit's orbit with some special talent, whether it was making music, making money, or making the world more pleasurable with their effortless social graces and intimidating beauty. Jay was attending for the first time with his girlfriend Elle, who was childhood friends with Dao.

He stepped away from the office window so as not give the impression that he was hovering. A breeze blew in from the west, where an expanse of ocean flashed through wispy sea-oaks. Behind them to the east, a 300-foot-high wall of limestone karst stood sentry like a giant

mottled movie screen. The cliffs cut that part of the peninsula off from the mainland, rendering the strip of beachfront a virtual island where, decades ago, enterprising travelers built the first of this group of houses now called the Railei Beach Club. All of them were set on stilts after the traditional fashion, most with red tile roofs, but otherwise each was unique in its airy design. It wasn't a "club" in the overly manicured, stuffy sense; plenty of palms and green space separated the dwellings, but the vibe was casual, the landscaping unfussy. The paths were sandy earth. This ease, Jay decided, was his favorite part.

Hanging up the phone, Malee turned to him.

"Baan Ling, right? Number 14? Everything all right with the room?"

The other Thai staff hadn't tried to address him while he stood there, instead allowing him to wait for Malee, presumably the only one among them who spoke English. That happened about half the time. Despite his Thai face, locals often read something in his dress or demeanor that told them he was not one of their own.

"It's great," he said. "I came to ask for two extra towels and…where's the ice?"

"You're the friend of Khun Elle?" She smiled broadly.

"I am. She's the one who wants the ice."

"She's very beautiful," she said.

"I'll tell her you said that. She'll be glad to hear it. Never gets tired of it, actually."

This made them all smile, though he wasn't sure if Malee was smiling because she got the joke, because he was smiling, or because that was simply her way.

Jay noticed she was pregnant and asked her in Thai how many months it would be. She gave the look of surprise at his fluency that he almost always got from Thais of a certain social class. Not the highest or the lowest—they were never surprised—but whatever 'middle' was.

Malee accompanied her reaction with a hand on her belly, as if both she and her baby were pleasantly caught off guard.

"You were born in Thailand?"

"It's complicated," he said, his standard reply.

Krit's party was one of the first things Elle told him about when they met as graduate students in Wisconsin, almost exactly a year ago. He avoided most Thai Student Association events, but he went to the "Thai New Year" celebration that day out of a sense of restlessness from too many late nights spent in the engineering projects laboratory. Sitting at plastic-covered tables with carved melons and silver bowls of water that no one was sprinkling, respectfully or otherwise, on anyone else, they commiserated about how they never thought they'd miss the messiness of the holiday back home in Bangkok—the traffic-less streets the only consolation for the city having been turned into the world's biggest water fight, the "playful" aggression not limited to the throngs in Silom and Khao San, but perpetrated by roving pickup trucks with homemade water cannons, or people on the sidewalks launching buckets of dirty water at motorcycle drivers who were most likely already drunk. That was Songkran for those who stayed in Bangkok, tourists or those who didn't have much choice. Most people—construction workers, domestic servants, taxi drivers; the rural migrants who kept the city running—went to their homes in the provinces, while wealthy urbanites went on holiday to Kyoto or Istanbul or Lausanne. That first day at the Thai Association Songkran party in Wisconsin, as Jay and Elle picked at their bowls of rambutan in sugar syrup and melting crushed ice, there was a brief stutter in their conversation when, in response to Elle's comment about how her family always went to their house in Hua Hin, Jay said that when he lived in Bangkok for a time as a boy, they would visit his grandmother in Si Saket.

"Si Saket? Your parents are from there?" He let her sit in her disorientation for a moment. He had come to expect stifled discomfort on the part of young Thais like Elle, so sure they had correctly identified his social class until he told them without explanation that his family was from one of the poorest provinces in the country. He didn't mention that his father, an architect, had been a partner in a property development firm in Bangkok with projects in Singapore and North America, that he built it from nothing, or that he lost it all on several overambitious towers in Pattaya that had stood half-constructed since the 1997 financial crisis caused the firm's debts to double overnight. His father's mistake was trusting dishonest accountants, he said. One unfortunate article in an international magazine mentioned their firm as one of what it called "the living dead," a "zombie" company that continued to operate long after its debts were unsustainable. But as his father explained it, there was so much blame to go around after the collapse it was hardly possible to talk about any given dispute in terms of right or wrong. The whole system at the time—flush with hot money from abroad, a form of foolish greed in itself—was wrong. His father went from designing and marketing the best buildings in a booming economy to avoiding the crosshairs of people with the unfettered power to determine, based on their own interests rather than any coherent bankruptcy law, what was legal or illegal. There was corruption in every sector. It wasn't until the most powerful people started losing money that everyone who was ever associated with their projects—besides themselves—were crooks who needed to be held accountable. In truth it was just that the crooks who happened to be in politics or the army or police wanted their money back regardless of whether a currency crash had occurred or not. His parents were left with enough salvaged funds to live a quiet retirement on a lake in upstate Wisconsin, with the caveat that, because of the bad blood with investors and still-unfinished legal action—justified or not—by people with influence, they

would never be able to return to Thailand again.

"Make the kind of friends who can get you out of jail," his father joked when Jay told him he and Elle were going to Bangkok.

"Crazy! What would he be in jail for," his mother said, straightening his collar, "besides being so intelligent and handsome at the same time. That should be a crime." She flashed his father a look then, to warn him off that line of conversation. In his natural optimism his father sometimes held out hope that old disagreements could be mended—the economy had long recovered three- or four-fold since the crash, and there were plenty of opportunities to go around. His mother preferred to let the past rest.

Jay mentioned almost none of that chapter of his parents' history to Elle, of course, touching on only the easiest details of their lives. Elle wasn't really interested in the details, anyway. Underneath her questions that first day at the Thai student event, she simply wanted to know if Jay was a peer or merely a fellow countryman. Without lying, he let her believe what she wanted, and what she wanted was for an articulate, foreign-educated man to be everything he appeared on the surface. And so, a world away from the place where he stood now, she told him about the unparalleled company at Krit's annual party, how much fun they had cooking for each other, playing silly games at night, staying up until dawn some mornings and walking on the beach. "Next year, you'll have to come," she said. They had known each other for no more than an hour when she said it. He took it as a polite comment, not a sincere invitation, but by the time they both graduated they were spending most evenings together and now here he was, getting ice for the drinks.

"She will come out in two months," Malee said. "I can feel it will be a girl." She added, "I hope she will be as beautiful as Elle," and beamed another smile.

Easily embarrassed, Jay looked at his flip-flops. “She’s not as pretty when she’s kept waiting. I should probably get that ice.”

Malee showed him to an area where ice, water, soda, and beer were available on the honor system. “Just mark it here,” she said, pointing out a notebook with a page for every house. She picked up a bucket and began filling it from a large cooler.

“Oh no, I can get it,” Jay said. “You’re—” For some reason he stopped himself from saying “pregnant.” The dark tone of her skin on her arm sharply contrasted with the bright yellow of her sleeveless maternity dress, and as she reached over the raised cooler to shovel ice with a steel scoop, he wondered where her husband was—if he was one of the carpenters the Beach Club kept employed with the owners’ continuous improvements to their houses, or if he was a fisherman living on the mainland.

“It’s ok,” she said, as Jay began to reach for the scoop but hesitated, reluctant to brush against her, even by accident, at the risk of making her uncomfortable. She finished filling the bucket with another scoop and handed it to him.

“Thank you,” he said, and, awkwardly rummaging in the pocket of his baggy shorts, thrusted a few twenty baht notes into her wet, ice-chilled hand.

Instantly her smile became a worried frown. “No need,” she said. “We can’t…” she tried to return the money, but he was backing away without looking where he was going, and he almost lost his balance when he stepped off the concrete floor onto the path. “Mr. Jay, we are not allowed.”

“Don’t tell,” he said over his shoulder, glancing back only briefly to see her holding the clump of notes out in front of her belly like a piece of used tissue. He was ashamed for making what he knew to be an unnecessary and awkward gesture, for treating her like a common maid or

porter when she was clearly a senior person on staff, proud of her English and justifiably so. He tried to put it out of his head while he walked back to Krit's house.

It had rained that morning. Jay kept his eye out for muddy patches on the ground as he thought about how he should have handled the interaction differently. It had been two decades since he lived in Thailand full-time. He knew the language, the culture, he even followed the opaque politics, but he still found himself constantly aware of the moments he failed to execute the proper social finesse. Things were going well with Elle since he'd moved to Bangkok, but none of their friends felt like his own and at times she seemed uneasy about the slower-than-expected pace with which he was finding his niche in the city of thirteen million. Understandably, and for his own good, she didn't want him to feel dependent on her. He hoped badly to make a positive impression while he was here in Krabi, to make himself more than Elle's guest.

As he approached the house, he went over the speech he had prepared on the plane from Bangkok. It was Elle's idea to say something appreciative to Krit when the time was right. She called Krit her "uncle," but it was only true in the broad sense of the word; they weren't related by blood. Krit did some important work for her father, a retired deputy minister, a long time ago, and became a trusted friend of the family, though it was difficult to imagine anyone of Elle's parents' generation attending this weekend. This year was a special one because Krit was turning fifty, but the next oldest person—Mike, a creative director at an ad agency, husband of Chaem, the only couple with kids—was forty. Everyone else was in their thirties—including Krit's wife, Dao—or their twenties, in the case of the recording artists and actors Krit knew through his work as an executive at GMM Grammy, the country's largest media and entertainment company.

"You're so good with words," Elle said, when she suggested Jay give a toast. According

to her, it had been done in years past. He planned to say something about the New Year as a new beginning, about Thai hospitality, and the importance of getting away together in a world where communication had become so instant and devoid of real feeling. He thought about quoting a poem from W.B. Yeats he'd known by heart since college, but he wasn't sure how that kind of thing would go over with Krit's crowd of music industry folks. He wished he knew something from a Thai poet—that would be a nice touch—but he had never read any Thai poems. He wouldn't risk quoting song lyrics, for fear of insulting their tastes.

"The iceman." Eunice looked down from the railing on the raised first floor, leaning over it slightly.

"Cometh," he said, setting the ice on the stairs. He turned on the faucet to wash his feet. Last night's rain had been unusual.

The back stairs to Krit's house opened onto a sprawling deck which connected all of the other rooms, including a kitchen with long swaths of granite countertop, four or five bedrooms, and several bathrooms. Since all of the bedrooms were occupied this weekend, a number of the guests, including Jay and Elle, were staying in other houses on the property.

Eunice greeted him with a kiss on the cheek while he handed over the ice. She smelled of eucalyptus. At the long wooden table, Na, one of the maids, was helping Nuk and Yuan slice vegetables. There were piles of eggplant, onion and garlic, a bowl full of shredded raw papaya, a krok. Nuk looked up through her black-framed glasses.

"Hey, just in time to make the chefs a drink."

"Or become a chef," Yuan said. The two of them seemed to come as a pair. They were the most bookish of the group. Yuan worked in publishing and Tuk, the only other person with roots in Isaan that Jay was aware of, was getting her PhD in botany or perhaps entomology—

Jay couldn't remember. Compared to everyone else the two of them seemed least likely to have significant others, and least likely to care. Jay found them easy to be around.

In a raised, covered area with a low table and cushions for sitting on the floor, an intense game of Jenga was underway. There was a collective gasp of relief mixed with disappointment as an angular Brazilian woman successfully slid her wooden block from the swaying tower and sat back holding it in the air, pleased with herself. Pun, Mike and Chaem's chubby one-year-old, sat corralled between four cushions, his attention captured by the commotion. Elle walked out of the adjacent sitting room where someone was strumming chords on a guitar.

"It's about time," she said, putting her arm around his waist. "Did you steal it from a polar bear?"

"Worse, a pregnant woman. I felt so awkward, I—"

"Baby, I'm thirsty. Can you make me a drink?" She squeezed his waist tighter.

"The usual?"

"Perfect. Can you make two, actually?"

"Yeah. I already got Nuk's order."

"In that case, could you make three?"

"At your service."

In a far corner of the kitchen, Magnus, a tall Dane whose restaurant in Bangkok had been the darling of the Thong Lor crowd since he opened it last year, was engrossed with a whole fish that lay in a clump of paper like something in a nest.

"I told them no cloudiness in the eyes," he said to no one in particular, poking it somewhere around the gills and wiping his hand on his apron.

As Jay pulled down three glasses and filled them with ice, he felt someone scoot closely

behind him and squeeze his thigh through his shorts. “Hey Mister,” Christine said, cutting herself a slice of lime. She gave Jay a raised eyebrow at Magnus’s consternation with the fish, as if to say, ‘I’m not getting involved.’ Underneath her weathered t-shirt she wasn’t wearing a bra.

Jay was still getting used to the ways these women expressed themselves—less formal than most Thais he’d known, more comfortable in their skin than many Americans. Christine was half-Malaysian. Her mother lived in Kuala Lumpur.

Drinks mixed, he carried all three glasses out in one hand and set one in front of Nuk’s cutting board.

“Vodka tonic, tall glass, extra lime.”

“My hero! Are you ready to join the chopping team?”

Jay felt obliged to say yes. There was a sense of comraderie-as-competitiveness among Elle’s group of friends that carried over to these weekends at the beach. As far as Jay could tell, about half of the people there were unaware or uninterested in the unspoken code of performance that had people cooking when it could have easily been handled by a maid. Elle, on the other hand, had given him two bags of frozen raspberries to pack in his suitcase, along with a carton of whole cream and a packet of golden cookie-crackers for a dessert she planned to make. “Save me a knife and a board,” Jay said to Nuk and Yuan.

“Don’t get comfortable over there,” Yuan said, peeling a mango. She squinted at him playfully over her slightly bulbous nose.

“Jay, you’ll come back?” Nuk said, equally playfully.

“Of course!”

“Are you honest?” Because her English was fluent but not native, it wasn’t clear if she was asking him if he was telling the truth at that particular moment or if he was an honest person

in general.

"Of course!" he said, grinning back.

"Are you sure?"

In the sitting area, the guitar chords were coming from a man in a black t-shirt and jeans whom Jay hadn't met before. Elle sat next to him, looking over his shoulder at his fingers moving across the frets.

"Thank you," she said when she noticed him come in the room. "That one's for P. Boi." It wasn't until Boi took his drink that Jay realized he forgot to make one for himself.

"P. Boi has a new album coming out in June. Krit discovered him at a concert at Chula."

"You look a little old to be in college," Jay joked.

"What?" Boi said in Thai, looking at Elle.

"Oh," he said in distorted English after she translated for him. "I'm not too old. They're just too young."

"I'm not so sure," Elle said, in Thai.

Boi strummed his guitar again, as if trying to come up with a melody. He had the kind of haircut that Jay associated with the readymade boybands that producers like Krit seemed to turn out on a semi-annual basis: longish, carefully sculpted layers that fell over his eyebrows—Jay's mother's hair in the 80's, basically.

"That was it," Elle said. "Do it again."

"Looks like real work is taking place in here," Jay said. "I'll leave you both to it. I'll be on the deck if you need me." Elle took a sip of her drink with her left hand, and with her right she reached under Boi's arm to point to a place on the neck of the guitar where he'd been strumming.

"This one," she said. "That's where you were doing it before."

Back at the table, Yuan patted a seat on the bench between her and Nuk. "Sit here," she said. On the other side of the table sat Na and Eunice, who was reading a magazine. Jay took his place between them. "Your job is onions," Nuk said. "We want to see you cry."

"I'm good at that."

"Chopping onions, or crying?" Yuan said.

"Both."

Speaking in Thai, Yuan and Nuk picked up a gossipy conversation about someone he didn't know. Na focused on her pealing and chopping. After a while, Jay asked where Krit and Dao were. Eunice said they were at the beach.

Na stood up to take some bowls to the kitchen, and Nuk asked her to see if Magnus needed help with the fish. Eunice cleared enough space to lay her magazine in front of her and used the glossy surface to roll a joint. Jay picked up the empty glasses, filled them with more ice, and brought the bottles of vodka and tonic from the kitchen and set them on the table. He poured everyone a new drink, cutting fresh slices of lime from the ones already on the table for somtam. He loved watching other people roll joints. It was not a skill he had perfected. Eunice's lithe fingers alighted delicately across the paper, massaging the weed into its paper casing with the casual dexterity and confidence of blind faith. The white creases on her knuckles stood out like little tan lines, almost intimate, and amidst her otherwise perfectly manicured nails the single chewed one on her pinky struck him as endearing. Jay's attempts at rolling always came out sloppy and loose. Eunice's had the shrink-wrapped shapeliness of a drill instructor or ballerina: they looked like they could stand on point.

If Jay didn't know how to roll his own joint, he wasn't lying when he said he knew how

to dice an onion, another skill you never forget once you've been taught. He thought of it as inscribing three axes into the yellow globe, and he liked the way the onion's natural layers helped send square pieces falling into a pile. Similarly, in Eunice's hands, the weed evened *itself* out when she rolled it back and forth; the fold bit by some property inherent in the paper. The sun was slipping behind the house. This was what this time of day was for: simple tasks, simple pleasures. He had come a long way to be here. Slicing vegetables had never felt like such a joy. He took several turns with Eunice's handiwork.

Elle sauntered out of the sitting room and took the last of the joint from Nuk. He could smell the smoke on her breath when she leaned forward to kiss him on the forehead. No one had said anything about the pungence from the onions, but at the tears streaming down his face, Elle said, in jest, "What's wrong, baby?" and everyone at the table burst out laughing. Elle, not yet on the same wavelength, did her best to play along. When they regained composure and Eunice took away the onions, Jay offered to make Elle another drink.

"I should take a break," she said. "The others were strong. There's no room in this oven. I'll have to do my custard at our place."

"You are not going to try to make a custard," Jay said, barely able to get out the last word through the re-emergence of his laughter. The idea seemed preposterous. He looked at Nuk, who was rubbing her eyes under glasses, and she started again too. He put a hand on his mouth to cover it and another on Elle's hip to try to keep her tethered, but he was unable to speak through the laughing. This time, rather than abating it fed on itself, seizing him. His forehead almost touched the table for a moment, he was so bent over.

"How much did you guys smoke?"

Jay lifted his head up and, though gasping for air, tried to reassure her he'd be back to

normal in a minute. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it as he gathered himself.

"Jay," said Yuan, trying to compose herself as well. "You are *maaw*." Stoned. It was one of those words that sounded more accurate in Thai somehow, despite the fact that it was less specific, and could mean drunk, high, under the influence in any way.

"It's Eunice's fault. Where'd she go?" Taking a deep breath, he said, "I put the stuff in our fridge. I'll be along to help you in a bit."

"I won't hold my breath," Elle said, leaving as Na approached the table to see if there was anything she could clear. They all straightened up, not because there was anything she didn't know about what they did, but out of habit.

Magnus, who had the fish stuffed with lemongrass and on the grill on the ground-level patio below them, was in better spirits now. The pleasant smell of charcoal wafted up, along with the rapid-fire sound of his high-pitched laughter. In the kitchen, the results of their chopping labor were coming together as a medley of roasted Italian vegetables, a mango salad, and somtam.

"Smoke is my favorite flavor!" Magnus shouted over the clank of the grill's hood slamming shut. Nuk persuaded Jay to make one more drink, because, she said, "It has to be the Jay way." When they were halfway through them, still sitting in their same places at the wooden table, crowded now with not only the remnants of their prep work, but also more bottles, bags of chips, and half-full bowls of salsa, Krit and Dao came walking up the stairs, followed by Mike and Chaem. It was dusk.

"How is everything?" Krit said, in his politest, perfectly enunciated Thai. They all turned to greet him. He was in his swimming trunks and a patterned short-sleeve button-up and carried a bag of beach items. Dao stood behind him, at least as tall as her husband, regarding the group at

the table with a smile. Her sarong was wrapped around her waist like a skirt, the thin straps of her black bikini top slung over her square shoulders. Her short hair was slicked back.

"Speak of the devil," Jay said, to his own surprise. They hadn't been speaking about Krit at all.

"Who are you calling a devil?" Dao said, wrapping her arm around Krit's neck from behind. "He's an angel."

"I mean," Jay said, searching, "the birthday boy."

"The devil boy," Dao said. "Or do they mean you're going to be in hell soon, you're so old?"

"I will be eventually. And I'll see you all there." This drew laughter from the others. Krit, soaking it in, said, "Isn't it great the way humor relieves tension?"

Before Jay could decide if he wanted to follow up on this, or what tension Krit was referring to, Dao said, "Who's in charge of the joint?" They all pointed at each other. The laughter was heartier this time, more genuine.

"Here's a roach," Jay said. "We need Eunice Eucalyptus." After a moment of silence, he said, "I'll go find her." He got up from his seat at the table—how long had he been sitting there? Two hours? More?—and stretched his legs with an exaggerated groan. He became aware of an urgent need to use the bathroom.

The one he found had no ceiling; the dark wooden walls stopped at about six feet and there was nothing else between the floor and the sky. Standing at the toilet, he could look up to the cliffs almost blue now in the twilight. They looked even closer from this vantage point, with the bathroom wall blocking the view of the ground. They were so tall they were like part of the sky itself: a craggy, pockmarked, tree-bristled sky.

On the way out of the bathroom, his hands smelling of expensive soap, he bumped into Krit.

"Hello again," Krit said. His English was as pitch-perfect as his Thai. Is that how he sees me? Jay wondered. As a foreigner?

"Beautiful house," Jay said.

"We're glad you could come. Elle said you had a problem with your flight from the States a few weeks ago?"

"Those Midwestern airports. Bad weather half the time."

"I've forgotten," Krit said, switching to Thai now. "What is 'Jay' short for?"

"Jiroj."

"That's right.

It was unclear which direction Krit was heading when they ran into each other, and Jay was wondering if he was in his way somehow. Regardless, he didn't seem to be in a hurry. They were in a passage between the bathroom and one of the bedrooms, whose windows were covered with a gauzy material, with only a lamp glowing inside. No one seemed to be in there.

"Love the view from the open air bathroom, by the way."

"Thank you. The architect is very talented. You come from a family of architects, am I right?"

Jay hesitated for longer than he would have if he were sober.

"Yes. My father. He's retired now." Krit looked at him with the calm, steady benevolence made possible in people accustomed to positions of power. How, Jay wondered, was his hair, fairly salted but all the more attractive for it, so cleanly parted when he had just come back from the beach? "How did you know that?" A silly question, he realized, as soon as he asked it. Elle

would have told him.

"My architect used to know him. Used to work with him."

Jay looked at the gutters above them, back at the bathroom door, as if this architect was somehow present in the house's most utilitarian details.

He thought of the gutters on his own parents' house then; how he had promised to take care of them when he was home last month, how the rain was continuous on the day he left with the gutters still clogged with debris. As his father drove him to the airport, Jay wondered if the gravel road to their cabin would be washed out again by the time his father got back. It had been an unusually wet spring.

"How has Thailand been treating you?" Krit asked.

"It's good to have someone to share it with."

"You mean Elle?"

Jay nodded.

"She's a lovely girl," Krit said. "I try to look out for her, like family. She needs someone who can take care of her."

"She's also not bad at taking care of herself."

"She deserves the best," Krit said.

Jay waited for an indication from Krit—a friendly nod, a hand on the shoulder—but Krit stood calmly in the bubble of his assuredness, unflappable and self-contained.

Eventually, Jay said, "I think so too. We all do."

He stepped aside and let Krit pass.

Re-entering the party, Jay's mind was divided into two familiar parts: the front, which equipped him with a placid face and scanned the landscape for an easy conversational pod to

enter, and the back, which processed his fear. Was Krit trying to tell him something? Was there something he wanted Jay to know that he knew? Answers that would normally come easily to him felt out of reach, as if parts of his brain were locked in separate rooms. As it was, the front part, the part responsible for keeping him on smooth social waters in this crowd of relaxed, enthusiastic faces, was staking a greater claim to priority.

Mike was opening a bottle of mezcal he purchased in New York for the occasion.

"I asked the guy what he recommended. I was handing over my hundred bucks in the checkout line, he stops and sighs and says, 'This one is special. It's like licking a piece of slate.' I thought, Slate? Really? Can I have a minute to reconsider my purchase?"

Mike handed small pours to a few people and the two of them found a place to sit. Jay liked Mike. He was raised in a suburb of Chicago by a single Chinese immigrant dad. He was smart.

The conversation turned to how Mike and Krit met. Mike used to have "E parties" at his apartment on the river, he said.

"People liked them because I was obsessive about the lighting. I followed a few simple rules: it has to be dimmable, it has to be warm, and it has to come from at least three sources. Sounds technical, but it's really just common sense. People didn't know that's why they liked my parties, but trust me: lighting is everything. That and the fact that we had the best drugs."

When Mike talked about Bangkok at the turn of the millennium, he made it sound like an entire city built to facilitate their weekly peaks of MDMA-induced euphoria. "Everyone at Narcissus on a Friday night would be wearing sunglasses and holding bottled water on the dance floor. Bottled water cost the same as a beer. They had to make money somehow." He took a sip of the mezcal and poured Jay a shot.

"Those sunglasses seem ridiculous now: we all thought we were hiding something, but they were like tinted signs on our face saying, 'I'm rolling my balls off.'"

This was before the early closing times and the "war on drugs" took effect in 2001, he said, so Narcissus was open until four in the morning. People timed their pill so they were peaking at 3:30, when the techno built to a crescendo that was almost too much to take, a thousand-odd dancers reaching their arms toward a sky that, outside the black walls of the club, would in an hour or two begin its slow bloom from black to grey to a washed-out, steely blue. But for that last song it was still a sea of bodies reaching up in unison, the earnest feeling like they'd made something together, until at the very summit of the music the bags of confetti popped above them and glittering squares fell toward their outstretched hands. It was on one of these nights that Mike met Krit, he said, when anyone could meet anyone if you were both wearing sunglasses and one of you had an extra bottle of water.

And it was at one of Mike's warmly-lit parties that Krit met Dao. She walked in wearing a tiara that she said was an ironic conversation piece. It turned out to be the real thing, in the sense that that was the night of the Thammasat ball and she had been elected queen. She had never tried ecstasy.

"She was precocious," Mike said. "Completely comfortable in any situation." She settled into one of the several day beds Mike had set up around his living room, equipped with lots of oversized pillows, and told Krit everything he wanted to know: what her father did (military), what she studied (art history), how she had learned English (semester in London), whether she had a boyfriend (yes, an instructor at the university) and why he wasn't there that night ("Because he made a mistake, apparently"). According to Mike, Dao said this last line right before she kissed Krit where they lay reclined on those floor pillows, uninhibited by the rest of

the bodies in the room. Krit never told her he was an up-and-coming executive at the nation's biggest recording company, he told Mike the next morning; he didn't mention his address in Sathorn, didn't tell her about the trip to Railei a few of them had taken together that year and his vow to build a house of his own there before he turned 50. In fact, his age was something he didn't mention either, because unlike every other woman he had ever met, Dao didn't ask any of those questions. The only thing he remembered her asking, he said, came as an aside. Stopping in mid-sentence, she shifted, looked him in the eye and said, "Do you feel the way I feel right now?"

"Yes, I do," he said. "Are you liking how you feel?"

"It's weird, but good," she said, and went on with whatever she was saying while he was deciding he would make her his wife.

Mike offered him another pour of mezcal. "Jesus, this stuff is remarkable." Across the deck, Magnus was becoming evangelistic.

"It's electric! Is it not?" Magnus sipped his side-by-side with an aged tequila, and compelling others to do the same. "Totally different complexion. Like a goddamn current through your tongue."

"What made them the best?" Jay asked Mike.

"What? The mezcal?"

"No. You said you always had the best drugs."

"Once Krit was on the scene."

"He bought them?"

Mike looked at him in disbelief. "This is Krit we're talking about, right?"

"This is off topic, but sometimes I feel uneasy or something, like he's reading me. You ever get that?"

They were still alone; Magnus was practically pulling his hair out with sensory delight where he stood, holding forth. He was right. The weed had hyper-sensitized Jay's taste buds, and the mezcal tasted like hearing electronica for the first time. It played on a different register.

"Look," Mike said, in the reassuring way he had. "You're a good guy. Everybody has something to hide. Even Krit."

"It's like my whole mouth is a tasting organ," Magnus said, still shouting from where he was. "Fuck! The sides of my cheeks, my gums. It's full vaginal." He twittered his high-pitched laugh and put his hand on a young Brazilian man's shoulder. "My mouth is a fucking vagina," he said, eyes wide with enthusiasm, imploring him to try it.

"But that doesn't mean he has anything to fear. That's a different story."

Jay wasn't following, so he let Mike continue.

"It doesn't take a genius to recognize that you don't get as rich as Krit from the salary of a nine-to-five job, even a very good one. That much should be obvious."

Mike sat back and scanned around them. He tended to stay fairly composed.

"If you want good stuff in that town, it starts with him. It has for a very long time."

The Brazilians and another two twenty-somethings drifted toward them, away from Magnus. Mike asked them what clubs were popular these days. When they told him, he said, "You know you're old when your choice of what drug to take on a Friday has nothing to do with going out, and everything to do with what will help you fall asleep as quickly as possible so you can get six hours before the baby wakes up."

Listening to Mike and watching Magnus, Jay had the feeling that there had been coke he

wasn't aware of, or hadn't been invited to enjoy. That was fine with him, though Elle would be disappointed—

He remembered Elle.

"Shit," he said, standing up. But as he moved toward the stairs, he saw her ascending. "Babes, I'm sorry. I was talking to Krit and there was this mezcal and, you should try the mezcal and—"

"Elle!" Magnus exclaimed, from across the deck, traversing half of the space between them until he realized that one of his two shot glasses was empty and he wheeled around again to fill it.

"I'm sorry I got distracted," Jay said.

"You're going to get it out of the oven when it's done," she said. "I put in my time. Now I need to catch up. Mark your watch for forty-five minutes."

"Forty-five minutes, got it." He put his hand on his watch. "Twenty-seven plus forty-five is…" She walked past him as he stood there, trying the calculation again in his head. Out of the corner of his eye he could see two people dancing while Na put out the bowls of food.

Dinner was buffet-style. They found seats on the built-in benches or carried their plates around the deck. When most people were done and plates begun piling in the kitchen, Dao asked him if was still going to give a toast.

Turning to Elle, he asked, "You still think I should?"

"You know what you want to say, right?"

"Give me a couple minutes."

He went to sit halfway down the back stairs, where a single outdoor light cast a bug-filled glow. He pulled his notes out of his pocket. There was something else he was going to say at the

end, but he forgot what it was. Above him, he heard a voice—he thought it was Elle's—going into one of the bedrooms. Must be coke after all, he thought. He went over his toast, whispering the words to himself. He heard the door open again, Dao's voice this time as they were leaving, and he put the paper back in his pocket.

When he came back up, everyone was already gathered around the low table on the raised part of the deck. Krit stood addressing them, clinking his glass with a fork. "I wanted to say a few words," Krit said.

"No! I wanted to say a toast to *you*. We wanted to—"

From the crowd there came a stray, clear 'boo,' then someone laughing, and another one or two boos in unison. The first one was was probably Magnus. He couldn't tell where the others came from.

Just as quickly, several women shushed them. Dao said something in a low voice. Everything happened at once, the booing and the shushing, but in that moment—with Krit already standing between him and the audience, frozen in interruption, and Jay aware too late that he *had* indeed spoken up at the wrong time, that he could just as easily have waited for Krit to finish—in the middle of all of this, he was surprised to find that his primary response was not embarrassment, not entirely. Rather, he felt strangely inflated by those first negative reaction from the crowd. It was the kind of thing that was done in half-jest, but there was clearly a sentiment among some of the men at least that Krit should not be interrupted, that instead of honoring him Jay was actually trying to draw attention to himself, unacceptable on this night. Or maybe Jay was imagining it all. Regardless, he didn't feel what he expected to feel in being booed. In that moment, standing up and asserting himself in front of everyone, he was the center of attention, and even his involuntary, immediate smile (another gift from his front-brain) in the

face of the heckling was something to be proud of. He felt he was getting the slightest taste of the pleasure the villain takes in his role—a role he almost never got to assume. That's what he tried to tell himself, anyway. All of this in front of people to whom he was not yet close—or hadn't been. Was being booed in good humor a marker of friendship?

Krit finished his own toast, which Jay had mostly been too distracted to hear. Krit concluded with something flattering about "the incredible woman I wake up with every morning." ("There's nothing incredible about me in the morning," she quipped, amidst sounds of sentimental appreciation from the group.) When he was finished, he turned to Jay and said, "The floor is yours."

Feeling suddenly nervous again and beside the point, Jay stood up. He left the paper in his pocket.

"I'm new here," he said. "I mean, this is my first time here, at this house, with everyone, and…"

He struggled to find traction, avoiding eye contact lest he confirm the concerned expressions he imagined.

"I was talking with Elle and Dao before, and we just thought that, it's your birthday, Krit, and we shouldn't let it pass without expressing our, our appreciation, even though you express your own appreciation very eloquently every day, even as you just did tonight." What was he saying? He felt suspended by the thinnest imaginable thread.

"This week is also Songkran, our most important holiday, despite the fact that we celebrate lots of other holidays now, too—foreign ones. But this is our Thai New Year, and it says something about what's important to Thai people, I think, because it's about honoring and paying respects to our elders. That's why everyone goes home, and where I come from (he was

off-script, but felt all right about it) we still do Songkran the old fashioned way, with silver bowls of water with petals of flowers and sprinkles on our grandmother's shoulder."

At that moment, as if on cue, Jay felt a drop of rain on his shoulder. A sprinkle. He raised his palms. "It's happening right now, actually."

Most of them were under the roof of the sheltered seating area. They hadn't felt it themselves and were unsure of what he was referring to.

"So yeah, we respect our elders in this country, for better or worse I guess, and I just want to say that Krit, I think a lot of people don't think of you as an elder—I was just telling someone the other day, I said I was going to a friend's fiftieth birthday party, but he's honestly not that—he's honestly the coolest fifty-year-old I know."

At this remark there was more laughter than Jay intended to provoke, of a different, not entirely generous kind.

"Really, I mean it, you're just one of the coolest people I know, and—" he caught Elle's look now and it was hard to read. Dao was smiling, as were Nuk and Yuan, but it was possible that Elle was willing him to wrap up what he hadn't even started to say.

"And, I mean honestly, all of the amazing things you do, the artists you work with, the communities you create—this community here tonight—and…I wasn't sure if I was going to do it, but there's a poem I wanted to say—" an audible groan from Magnus, but just as quickly Dao hushed them again—"It's a poem about books and fireplaces, not music and beaches, but it goes…"

Breathing deeply, he took inventory of his memory.

"It goes, 'When you are old and grey and full of sleep, and—"

Something in the composed tolerance of Krit's face shifted with a current of annoyance.

As one of the people standing on the deck exposed, he took his second glance at the sky.

"And, actually, I'm not going to finish that poem, because Krit isn't old yet and his grey looks awesome on him actually. I think we all hope we look that good when we…I…so anyway, I just want to say happy Songkran-birthday to Krit and to dip my fingers in this incredible electric slate-tasting alcohol—"

He dipped his fingers in his glass and, walking to Krit, sprinkled a few drops on his shoulders. "And join mother nature in saying cheers and many more happy Songkrans to Krit."

Jay held up his glass to the crowd and was about to say cheers when Krit faced the crowd himself and offered a graceful wai, reminding Jay that his own gesture of respect should have concluded with a wai to Krit first. Hastily, Jay tried to return the wai, but he was still holding his glass, making the gesture clumsy and almost comical, and besides, Krit was moving in for what appeared to be a hug—either because he thought Jay was moving that way or to rescue Jay from his breach of protocol and emphasize for everyone Jay's Americanness, thus helping to save face for both of them.

A smattering of applause accompanied the halfhearted hug, and perhaps some muttering too, the tenor of which Jay still could not register. By the time Jay could stand back again and attempt to raise his glass to Krit several people had already gone about breaking up the moment by stepping out from under the roof to check the enthusiasm of the rain.

It had passed. It appeared to have been truly toast-specific, though the absence of stars indicated a cloudy night sky.

Krit walked toward Dao and her friends, including Elle. He was met with another hug, this one more natural. Jay sat back down on the built-in benches in the far corner of the deck and picked at his plate of cold food, stealing glances at the others as they smiled and talked,

especially Krit, Dao, and Elle. He wanted to read their thoughts from their facial expressions, but such a thing was impossible. He finished what was in his glass.

Someone turned the music up again, a song Jay didn't recognize. It was one of Krit's newer artists, no doubt. Amidst the flurry of fresh drinks and pent-up-conversation–making, Ek and Janson, both photographers, stood nearest to Jay, conducting an intense dialogue about their favorite old-school R&B artists. It turned out that they had many of them in common. Jay drifted at the perimeter of their conversation but did not enter it, exactly. He didn't think he could match Ek's enthusiasm or expertise. He nodded at a number of names he did not actually recognize. And if *he* didn't recognize them, there was no way that most of the rest of the party would. Certainly not the Brazilians, or Boi, to whom he hadn't spoken at length but who seemed to him, with his fitted jeans, beaded string bracelet and thick, expensively-cut hair, like the typical, vacuous aspiring popstar with no fidelity to his own influences—no influences, really, other than a willingness to go along with anything. He was ready to be ska, or metal, or bubble-gum pop—whatever people like Krit told him to be. In a year, someone from GMM Grammy would be telling him what to wear to the gym.

Ek paused to address Jay. "Nice speech man. It was epic." He chuckled, glanced at Jansen. "You should've quoted some Prince though."

"Oh my god, that would have been perfect," Jansen said. "Krit fucking loves Prince."

"He does?" Ek said.

"He should. Everybody should."

Boi approached them. Or rather, he approached the iPod and acknowledged his proximity to them with a smile and a thumbs up.

"There's a movement to get Prince on the playlist," Jansen said.

Boi nodded and looked up from the screen. After a moment of half-understanding he said "Yeah!" like an afterthought.

"Dude, yes," Jansen said. "We're building a critical mass."

"What are you thinking? *Sign o' the Times*?"

"It's Gonna Be a Beautiful Night, baby! Boi, does he have that album?"

Boi looked at him again, smiled and nodded, and said, "Yeah."

"Totally," Jay said, stepping closer into the circle. "This stuff they've been playing is giving me a…not a headache, but, like, it's like it's grabbing at heartstrings I don't have." Boi continued to be engrossed in scrolling through the list of artists on his iPod. Ek and Jansen would occasionally lean over to try to see his screen as well. It wasn't clear that any of them had heard the heartstrings comment.

"Holy shit," Jansen said. "You have to play some Wilson Pickett."

"Oh my god. I've been wanting Krit to get someone to do a cover of 'Funky Broadway' forever. Something smoother, a little less raw—still Thai style, you know—but with that same looseness."

Jay had listened to Wilson Pickett's greatest hits more times than he could remember. He couldn't find a way into the conversation.

"That's it, man—looseness," Ek said. "You ever see that concert where he sends everyone into a frenzy? Climbing on stage, not even in control of their own bodies. And his voice—this random woman kisses him up there and he scrapes out this long 'Yeahhh' from the back of his throat."

"It's like he's in control, but everyone else is losing it up there," Jay said.

"Speaking of performances," Jansen said, looking at Jay for the first time. "What was all that silliness about 'our traditions'? You don't see Magnus up there pretending to be Swedish."

"He's not?" Ek said.

"That's not what I—that's not a good comparis—" Boi had finally settled on a new song and Jay was drowned out in the accidental burst in volume of the first few chords.

Jansen continued, "What I'm saying is, it's like jazz, man. It's, like, the most American art form because it's the *least* American." Ek nodded.

Jay had no idea what they were saying about Magnus or jazz, but he thought he understood what they were saying about him.

"If we can't be true to ourselves, how can we be true to our fans? Right, Krit?" Ek said, raising his voice at the end in the hope of getting Krit's attention.

The Thai ballad Boi chose was as saccharine and cliché as anything that played before.

Every day of his life in the U.S. until college, Jay's father put a single-serving box of sweetened, fortified soy milk in his lunch bag, despite the fact that Jay hated the stuff and told him so. It reminded him of baby food. It reminded his father of the security of loving parents in a rural town and the miracles of a modernizing Thailand after the Second World War. He ordered cases of it mailed to their house at exorbitant prices. Eventually Jay gave up his protests and passed each box along to a girl in his grade who thought it made her daring and exotic to drink them. Now, there were moments like this one when, for some reason—the heavy sweetness, maybe—he remembered the flavor and associated it not with Wisconsin, but with Thailand.

"Krit! We need to talk," Jansen said.

Krit came over and gave Jay a polite raise of his glass before hearing Jansen out. While Jansen gave his spiel, Boi stood by, arching an eyebrow to Krit that said he was going to politely

excuse himself.

"We gotta pay tribute to the great ones that came before," Jansen concluded. They waited for Krit's response.

"If I'm not mistaken, that's what Jay was trying to say in his speech." He didn't exactly look at Jay when he said this.

"I feel like snacking," Ek said. "What's for dessert?"

"Where's that custard we were hearing about?" Krit said. Jay had no idea how long it had been since Elle came back—he had forgotten it a second time.

At the bottom of the stairs he shuffled through the pile of flip-flops and sandals with his feet, gripping his toes into the first two that were remotely his size. He still held his glass as he followed the trail, illuminated only by his phone, toward the house where they were staying. He didn't remember it being such a long walk during the day.

In their kitchen he grabbed the first two towels he could find, flinging open drawers and leaving them ajar, letting other towels fall to the floor. He could smell the condensed sweet-tartness of the baked raspberry, and—more concerning—a buttery crust with notes of charcoal underneath. He flung open the oven door as if it was on fire, and pulled out the heavy dish. It bubbled as he set it on top of the stove. The whole thing was too hot and runny to mess with, but there was a chance the crust was edible.

Regaining his calm, Jay closed the drawers and poured himself a glass of water as the custard cooled. He remembered Elle saying something about it needing the fridge, but the party was reaching full momentum without him. He intended to wait until it at least stopped bubbling around edges, but this, too, showed no sign of abating, so Jay grabbed two more cloths and, double-insulated on both hands, proceeded to carry the nearly overflowing dish out of the

cloying air of the kitchen and into the dark, damp grounds where the humidity lent its own, very different, but still sour-sweet smell to the night.

Carrying the scalding dish in the dark, his intoxication blossomed into full-fledged vertigo. At this hour all of the other houses had turned off their lights. He oriented himself by the great grey band of ocean to his right, but he couldn't see where he was stepping. Most disconcerting of all was the fact that, even if he were to bring the rectangular dish to his face, he could have not seen it, so thick was the darkness. He could feel its heat radiating toward his arms. When sober, he could sense what was level, even in the dark. In his present state, he had no confidence in his inner horizon. The dish could have been at a forty-five-degree angle and he would not have been able to tell. He had visions of himself burying his throbbing hands in their bucket of precious ice.

He walked in slow, high steps to keep himself from tripping over roots. The light from the house was tiny and far away—he expected to have been able to hear the music from where he was, but everything was subsumed by the rumble of the waves. Through force of effort he strained to keep it straight as best he could, to get his bearings and visualize the orientation of the dish in the dark, until, after what felt like the equivalent of a perilous journey through days of desert fog, he finally found himself close enough to the back stairs to see the state of the custard. He was out of the woods, literally. He kept walking as he looked down, and that's when he felt its molten contents scalding the soft skin on the inside of his forearm. He wanted to scream, to throw it on the ground. Miraculously, he did neither. He tilted it the wrong way and it burned him again.

He set the custard down on the bottom step of the stairs to the deck and ran some water

from the foot faucet over his arm. Briefly he tried to dry it on his pants, but the pain was intense, so he left it drip. He picked up the dish again—had a few drops of water splashed into it from the faucet?—and proceeded.

More people were dancing when he got to the first floor. More surfaces were filled with empty glasses and bottles. Immediately, several people approached him with excited requests for the custard, which was still not a custard at all but a warm, bright red, liquidy mess.

"It has to sit," Elle objected, her hair wild, nearly tripping over herself as she came forward. She was adamant and very drunk. It would only be a matter of time before Jay would have to tend to her.

Despite Elle's objections, the others would not let Jay put the custard in the fridge. They demanded slices, ignoring too his concern that the crust might be burned. With a big spoon he scooped a half-dozen or so portions into bowls. Eunice and Christine insisted that the burned bits gave it more flavor. Krit, looking as the night progressed like the only person in control of himself, said something about the custard that Jay couldn't hear over the music.

"I forgot about it and it burned." Jay felt that he could see himself as others did—going through a tremendous amount of effort with conspicuously questionable results—and he looked ridiculous. He scanned the party for a joint in hopes that it might numb the sting on his forearm.

"I said, anything is good when you're drunk," Krit said, gesturing to his bowl.

Jay nodded.

"Did you learn that recipe in Wisconsin?"

"It's Elle's," he said, and looked around for her, but she was gone again. "Have you seen her?"

"She's over there, I think." Krit pointed to the entrance to the sitting area, but Jay

couldn't see inside from where they stood.

After a moment, Krit said, "Need anything from the kitchen?"

Jay said no and headed toward the bathroom to wash the stickiness off his hands. The only light came from the flicker of a candle. When he had the door halfway open, he heard Dao's voice, in Thai, say, "Come on in."

He did as he was told. She was alone, standing at the sink, illuminated from below by the candle. "Lock the door," she said.

She held a small makeup mirror and a short straw. Her posture was impeccable, even at the sink. Only her head tilted forward from her exquisitely straight spine.

"You like special K?"

"I don't know. Should I?"

She gave a little gasp of faux-surprise. "You've never tried ketamine?" Reaching for a small plastic bag, she said, "It's *good*," drawing out the vowel. "Are you ready for a treat?"

It occurred to him that, if he was going to introduce a new drug into the evening, he should do it together with—or at least consult—Elle, but she seemed very far away right now, and he knew that when he finally did traverse the entire party and re-establish contact with her, the catching up and re-orienting would require a significant investment of time. He was curious about the white powder Dao was placing on the hand mirror—much less than a line of coke. He enjoyed the contrast of being in that semi-secluded ceiling-less space, with its candlelight flapping on the wooden walls and a handful of stars poking through holes in the woolen sky above them.

Dao put the little mirror on the sink and faced him.

"Are you ready?" The light played over her face and cast deep shadows above her

collarbone. She stood perfectly still, staring right into him, as if trying to still him too. She put both hands on top of his shoulders. “Are you relaxed?” She held her stare, looking for an answer, her eyes serious while the upturned corners of her mouth suggested it was a game. “It’s important to relax. And don’t take too much. We don’t want you to fall into a K-hole.”

As she finished saying this she looked around the bathroom. It was spacious, with a wood and tile floor, a large, open shower against the back wall.

“You know what? We should go somewhere where you can sit down and be comfortable. Just in case.” As she packed up her apparatus, there was a knock on the door. Dao opened it.

“What’s going on in here?” Christine said, feigning the voice of an authority figure, sticking her face through a crack in the doorway.

“K time,” Dao said. “Jay’s first.” She took his hand and led him behind Christine, following her into the bedroom across the hall. This time, he locked it without being asked.

Large suitcases sat on the floor, their contents spilling out over their edges like flowers in a planter. The bed was crisply made in white linens.

“Who’s room is this?” he asked.

“Yuan and Nuk’s. They won’t mind.”

Christine and Dao shared an uncanny composure. They were clearly close. Christine was quieter, and unlike Dao, who always seemed privy to some inside joke she didn’t need to tell, Christine’s self-possession occasionally offered glimpses of melancholy. She sat on the end of the bed, letting Dao do the talking while Jay made himself comfortable sitting up against the headboard. As Dao prepared the powder at the nightstand, Christine reached over, squeezed his little toe, and winked. Just as quickly, though, she looked back down at the rug and was somewhere else. Jay thought she was too smart for Magnus, too sensitive, and it seemed to him

from her intermittent glances that, like him, she sometimes felt too aware of her situation at every turn. Was Magnus a distraction from that too-seeing self? Was his lack of introspection really a solution for her?

"Ok," Dao said. "Just take this little bump here. Don't worry, if you start to go too far into yourself, we'll be here to pull you back."

"I feel like maybe we should get Elle?"

"Take this first and then we'll get her. She drank too much for K."

Christine slid up to the top of the bed and sat close to him at his left. Dao sat facing him on the edge of the bed to his right.

"Oo—did you do that here?" Dao said, looking at his arm. "That's going to hurt in the morning."

The lamp on the nightstand seemed suddenly overbearing, and as if reading his mind, Dao flicked it off. "Can you still see?"

He could. He took the white powder into his nose, quickly and vigorously, an ugly sound. A bitter and metallic taste at the back of his throat.

Christine took some herself, less ceremoniously than he. Dao served herself last. She took his hand with both of hers.

"Better than coke, right?"

He fanned his legs across the soft, cotton comforter and sunk back into the pillows against the headboard. Or rather, his body sunk back while his awareness moved slightly forward as if tied to his body by something elastic. He was cold-hot. The music outside grew both clearer and farther away. He wondered about time, if anyone would be noticing they were gone. Christine looked up at him and smiled. "I think it agrees with him," she said, and ran the back of

her fingers against his tingling cheek. She lay her head on his shoulder.

They were on each side of him, speaking gently when they spoke at all. They were, both, undeniably attractive. What Jay felt at that moment, however, was not physical desire. Rather, he felt the serene arousal of a sense of belonging, irrevocably, to these two luminous beings. A deep clarity. His own skin was soft and smooth for a man's, he knew. That was why Christine had touched it. But it was dusty brown paper compared to the liquid glow of their cheekbones, chins, noses. Dao was kneading the flesh between his finger and thumb. They were letting him in, close enough to where he could see the pores at the edges of their eyebrows. Dao let go of his right hand and he used it to run his fingers through the glossy hair on Christine's head, which still rested on his other arm. He did it slowly, like a brother, or a father to a child. Contently, she hummed.

There was another knock on the door. It was Nuk.

"Skinny dipping," she said. "Mandatory for everyone."

Slowly, they rose to their feet and went outside. Many people had already left for the beach. In the sitting room, Elle lay on the couch, her feet resting on Boi's lap, while Boi spoke to Krit, who sat on the adjacent couch. Boi's guitar was propped against the wall. Elle seemed in and out of consciousness.

"Beach time?" Krit said.

"That was the idea," Jay said. "You?"

"Always. It's a tradition."

"I should get this girl home first."

"I'm *awake*," Elle said into her pillow, shifting her feet deeper into Boi's lap.

Dao came in and asked Krit if he was coming.

"Elle, I can take you to the room," Jay said. "You'll be more comfortable there."

"Where have you been?" she said in a sleepy whine.

"Here, at the party. Would you like some water?"

"I said, I'm fine."

Dao asked Elle in lilting Thai if she felt dizzy. She said it like she was speaking to a child.

"A little bit," Elle said.

For a moment they all considered the situation. Then, in Thai, Boi said, "I can take care of her. I don't like to swim."

"Thanks," Jay said, in English. "But there's no need." He took a single step toward Elle, but he was still several feet away. "Sweetie, let's—"

"Go!" she said, her voice sharp but her eyes still closed.

Krit stood up and put his hand on Jay's shoulder. "It's all right." Turning to Boi, he said, "You can take her back to her room if she wants to go?"

"I can," Boi said.

Jay felt like he was on stage with no cue. *You're not asleep*, he wanted to say. Open your eyes and come back. You're not asleep.

"Let's join the others," Krit said.

Before Jay could muster a more convincing response, Krit led him out of the room.

In their room to drop off his valuables before heading to the beach, Jay paused. He felt he should sit down on the bed and think, but he knew he must keep moving if he didn't want to pass out for the night. Stepping back outside, he considered doubling back to check on Elle, but he

was afraid that in her agitated, intoxicated state she might make a scene. That was the last thing he wanted to be responsible for at Krit's party. From the direction of the surf a glowing, red disk levitated at a steady speed back and forth behind the tree line. Its light dragged behind it like a tail. He approached. Mixed with the sound of the ocean, Magnus's high-pitched laugh carried over on the breeze. They were throwing an illuminated Frisbee.

Under the umbrella of a tree, Christine and Dao stood facing the water.

"Are we doing this or what?" Christine said.

"Don't be afraid of the jelly fish. It only stings for a little while," Dao said, and pinched his side. "Why are you still wearing clothes?"

Dao pulled her shirt over her head, and Christine followed. Fluidly, as if their movements were connected, their silhouettes bent at the waist as if touching their ankles. By the curves of their outlines against the night sky, he knew they were naked.

"Come on! Take it off," Dao said, and tugged on his shirt as they turned and walked briskly toward the water.

No one else seemed to be paying any attention. Most of them were mesmerized by their glowing disk. Jay stood frozen for a moment, watching the women disappear toward the water, the outlines of their legs suddenly visible against the white strip of foam where the water met the shore. When Dao stood naked in front of him there was moment when he could see the contour of her breast; she raised both of her arms to put her hands in her hair—what for? It was too short to pin up—and arched her back. Krit had referred to nude swimming as a tradition. They knew all along that this is where the night would end up.

He set his clothes in a pile by a log and walked toward the water.

Down the beach to the left there were shapes—Jansen, perhaps, with a few others. Ahead

of him, two dark heads floated on the water.

The heavy sway of the low waves lifted him so that he felt he could almost float.

"So nice," Christine said. "Like a warm hug."

He was about ten feet from them in the water. His feet touched the sand but came up slightly with each wave. He spread his arms wide, moved them slowly like a pair of wings. The water felt like cotton.

"What is going on with Jansen and that girl?" Dao said.

As they all turned to face the shore he drifted closer to them, or they to him. Jansen and his companion, one of the Brazilians, were playfully fighting over the Frisbee on the edge of the water. He may have been trying to throw her in the water. At the far left end of the beach, beneath a yellow light mounted to the Beach Club office, a figure moved with sober deliberateness, bringing in cushions from the chairs on the sala. Preparing, likely, for rain. Jay wasn't sure of the time, but it must have been after midnight.

Slightly further out than he, the women were almost shoulder to shoulder.

"It's too deep to stand," Dao said. "You have to help us up."

Jay was tall enough to stand but the women were treading water. He reached out and Christine took his hand. Christine leaned on him as much as she could with one outstretched arm, not enough to make much difference. Her grip was firm and purposeful. Jay decided that, of everyone in the group, her quiet intensity was most interesting, even soothing to him. It might have been the K and the alcohol and the weed, but he didn't think it was arrogant of him to perceive that she like his company too.

"Brace your foot on his hip," Dao said, "and you won't have to tread water."

"Christine," Magnus bellowed from the beach in an exaggerated Danish accent, like a

Norse war cry. “Where in God’s name are you?”

“Here,” she said, with more restraint, only as loud as was necessary for her to be heard. “Right in front of you.”

Before he was halfway there, she gave Jay’s hand a final squeeze to indicate she was about to let go and she swam in to meet him.

“She doesn’t know how to do it,” Dao said, stretching out one arm to him and, after he took it, the other. Immediately her foot found the outside of his right leg and she braced it against his hip, using the tension in their arms to hold herself up under the water. She leaned her head back and faced the sky.

“Look at that moon lighting up the edges of those thick clouds,” she said. “I love a warm rain. I love a hard rain in a warm ocean.”

Dark humps of outcroppings framed the cove. Her fingers were long in his palm, wrapping all the way around to the back of his hand. Dao held onto him in a way that felt much more proprietary than Christine’s.

“It’s cool that you and Elle have the kind of relationship you do,” she said. “It used to be quite difficult for me.”

He tried to formulate a reply that asked her to clarify without revealing himself to be confused. Even after spending this time with the group, he was unclear what “cool” meant to them. Acting prudishly reserved or protective would not cast him in a good light, of that he felt sure. It would embarrass Elle. Would she not want him to play along more gracefully? If she didn’t think he was the type of person who could handle the innuendo and affection and interesting tension—recognize it as harmless recreation—why would she have invited him in the first place?

He thought he felt a raindrop, unless it was splash, and then he felt something much less ambiguous: a foot running lightly up the inside of his leg. It paused and he expected it to stop, a harmless joke, but it continued, fluttering against the underside of his sex. He flinched.

"I told you to watch out for the jellyfish," Dao said.

Just as quickly, her second foot was braced against his hip again. The sensation, though, lingered. The area beneath his groin pulsed with the beginnings of arousal.

It wasn't just Dao, he thought, that lulled him into such a state of exhilarated relaxation, if such a feeling was even possible. She was not entirely responsible. It wasn't even the drugs or Krit or anyone else's fault for setting a certain tone for the weekend. It was how he functioned in this place. He was so keen to follow the flow of things, to not make the mistake of acting like he would in Wisconsin, that he let himself be carried by dangerous currents. Dao had let go of one of his hands now and was turned at an angle to him so that in the brief intervals when the moon moved out from behind the clouds he saw her lit up in the same strobe of the waves that slid up and down the top of her torso, lapping at the top of her armpits and retreating further down the slope of her chest. If he moved closer to her it was unclear if he would be overstepping his bounds or merely acquiescing to what she was suggesting should happen if she had her way and he had the clarity of mind to know how he was expected to respond to her advances. He could banish judgment and follow the moment but he didn't trust his instincts and it seemed to him that one of them might be on the verge of making a very serious mistake.

"What is this?" said a voice he didn't immediately identify as Krit's, because in his mind Krit was still playing Frisbee. They instantly let go and drifted several feet apart.

Dao moved to Krit and wrapped herself around him from behind.

The rain was unmistakable now, as warm as the water. Because he was already wet it felt

benign, nothing more than a ticklish sensation on his scalp and face.

"Are you happy, hubby?" Dao said.

"Another good year," Krit said. "Another one to come."

"Do we have a van to Phuket?" Dao asked.

"We do," Krit said.

After a moment, Jay said, "You're flying home from Phuket?"

Krit breathed out a trace of a laugh. "No. Round two. A friend's boat."

Jay nodded in the dark.

"It gets to be a long time, Songkran, with the whole week, staying in one place. My friend has a yacht. The last few years, it's become another tradition."

"Nice," Jay said.

"Limited space, of course, even on a boat that size, otherwise—"

"No problem," Jay said. "We're flying to Ubon anyway. My grandmother lives in Si Saket."

"Oh," Dao said. "I think—"

"Typical Elle," Krit said. "She forgot to tell you?"

"What's that?" Jay said.

"She decided she needed some more time at the beach."

They were farther out now. Jay was treading water.

"It's cool that you don't mind Krit inviting Boi here," Dao said. "But you're having fun, right?"

He let it sink in.

"Why would I mind?"

“Yeah,” she said. “Just go with it, right? One last weekend fling together? It’s kind of romantic, actually.”

Things had quieted down: the glowing disc no longer traced the shore, Jansen and the Brazilian had settled on less strenuous play, Magnus and Christine had gone in. Under the office light, Malee closed a few forgotten shutters.

“It’s too bad,” Dao said, “You fit in well.”

He couldn’t remember what was said next. Wavelets flickered dully all around them. After a while, Krit suggested they go in too.

“See you in the morning,” Dao said. “I hope we find our clothes.”

Jay faced the shore. Through the trees, a few distant windows were lit up like ghosts. He looked for the place where Krit’s house should be, but he didn’t see any lights.

A faint patter of drops on the water called his attention back to the vast ocean in which he swam. It was raining harder now. The low waves lapped at his chest. He licked the salty wetness from his lips. He wasn’t ready to leave the water, but he had a sudden, strong desire to touch bottom.

Far off to the left side of that stretch of beach, Malee stood in the sheltered space adjoining the office; she had apparently been caught in the rain. She must have been exhausted, he thought, pregnant and still on her feet. She was stationary, facing his direction; she could have been staring directly at him if it wasn’t impossible for her to see him from where she stood in the light. How trying for her to be kept from home, from her husband, her reassuringly normal, safe, secure union. Of everyone he had met on this beach, Malee’s life had been the easiest for him to imagine. His instinct was to go and help her, bring her an umbrella or carry whatever supplies might need to be locked up before she was able to leave. But she wouldn’t want that from him.

To her, he'd just be another cosmopolitan jerk who didn't know enough to respect her space. What happens if you spend too much time in situations where other people can't properly know who you are? Would you eventually cease to know yourself?

The rain had shed all of its earlier inhibitions and it came tumbling down now at full throttle. Looking through it, it appeared almost pale. Off to the south, though, in the far distance past the edge of the bay, the horizon looked clear. Did this weather, he wondered, settle like a cool sheet above just this peninsula? He tried to look up as Dao had done. What must the rain look like from higher in the sky? From the plane that brought him here or the one that would take him away, on his own? His purpose, his place in the weekend, all of it was out of focus, but he could see clearly the millions of crowded drops, a thick mist. A whiteness floating over the cliffs.

Elle wouldn't be in their bungalow when he returned, this much he knew. P'Boi had already led her—half carried her—to his room with Krit's blessing. Nothing sinister—Boi may not have even tried to wake her up. It was enough to have her there next to him in the morning to solidify the change in her relationship status. Or perhaps she wasn't as tired as she let on, merely impatient for Jay to leave. Perhaps this very moment she was feigning a sense of guilt about Jay's being here and learning this way, feeling real apprehension at having to face him in the morning, to retrieve her bags and gather her things. There were whole worlds of Thai his parents never taught him, that they couldn't have even if they had wanted to—the kinds of things young lovers of a certain age whisper to each other in bed at night, for instance. Slang worn like a badge of belonging to a specific generation and class; various tones of voice that, hard as it was to believe, could become trendy or not. Maybe it wasn't hard to believe; maybe it was simply rare to consider all of these ways a person can fail at belonging. He saw it all unfold, the rest of Elle's night, each one of its shaded turns, and he knew that although his bed was probably

waiting for him there were no rooms truly open to him here any longer; nowhere on that shore was a place for him. He saw the versions of what he might find in the morning and they made him shudder.

In his parents' house, back on the wooded lake, his father was sketching or napping or drinking tea. Reading at the kitchen table, lulled by the hush of rain on the roof, his mother would be singing something she learned as a child. If they felt lonely or estranged in Wisconsin it was impossible to tell. They were growing old and they seemed to only need each other. They weren't looking for redemption, from him or anyone else. And if they were, how would they find it? Through humility and right action, so that no one could ever question their integrity? Or by playing the game of social influence more skilfully, even if it might again betray them? He knew his parents wanted his happiness. They wanted him to find his own path, but the path before him felt no clearer than it ever had. The water stretched away from him in three directions—four, even, if one considered the ocean of rain that fell from the sky. How much more menacing the waves felt when they held him alone—how coherent and infinite the black mass of the sea. His sense of himself, his whole identity, stretched out away from him too, dissipating into the sand more quickly than he could gather it up.

Soon—perhaps after Malee had felt it appropriate to go home herself—he would head back to shore. There would be no chance of disturbing her or anyone else. Eventually, circling about, he would find where he left his things. Under the shelter of a dripping tree he would dress quietly in the dark, the whole beach emptied of its silhouettes.

CITY

On Ratchadamnoen

Simon and Chen sat in shadow on the small patio in the back garden, visible only to each other by the long rectangles of light feet from inside the house where Pui was cooking dinner. Above the wall that surrounded them, the ambient yellow of the city washed out the stars. They each held a drink, the ice already melted, slices of squeezed lime like flotsam. It was the second week of April, peak heat, but they had both lived in Bangkok long enough that the temperature made little difference to either of them. Hot was hot. Later, they would shower. Now they would sweat.

A thud from the darkness somewhere behind them: a mango tree dropping its ripe fruit to the sandy ground.

"That one's for the rats," Simon said. "More ice?" He kept his voice low out of habit, despite the fact that his two-year-old, Ethan, wouldn't be able to hear them from his room where he slept. Simon's hush gave their conversation a conspiratorial tone it didn't warrant.

"I'm good," Chen said. "Don't worry about me."

Chen held his Nikon D20 in his lap and flipped through what he'd taken that day.

"I've never seen a protest that looked more like a country fair," he said.

The light from the display screen illuminated his face from below with a ghostly blue. He was clearly proud of his work. Not in a boastful way, and Simon knew he should be happy for

him too. After all, Chen was there to help. This was how Chen always operated: he only every gave, whether it be his time, encouragement, or company. Which is why Simon felt all the more guilty when he caught himself staring, trying to figure out why his friend seemed so selfish.

They were both photographers. Over the last week or so, they'd established a pattern: Chen would come over in the morning to go over a few things with the camera or share a bit of info he'd heard from other journalists. They'd spend some time in the afternoon shooting and, usually, come back to Simon and Pui's for a drink or some food.

"Arisman has balls trying to storm the first infantry headquarters," Chen said. "I would not want to be sprayed with a water cannon."

Barely audible in the distance, the barking through loudspeakers at the protest site reached them over the white noise of traffic. They couldn't make out the words but the cadence had an old-fashioned, reverberated effect. Despite originating from almost a mile away, it still managed to carry to the garden.

"That might be him speaking now," Chen said.

Since March, thousands of "Red Shirts" had set up camp in two parts of the city: a bridge in the old quarter near Democracy Monument, on Ratchadamnoen Avenue, and at Ratchaprasong, a major intersection in the upscale shopping district, not far from Simon's house. In non-stop speeches delivered from a huge stage they'd built in the middle of the occupied street, they demanded early elections, fairer treatment by the elite, and the return of the former prime minister, a self-made billionaire, now self-exiled and convicted of corruption in absentia. The leaders making those speeches—passionate or monotonous, incendiary or ridiculous—oozed with political cynicism. And they marshaled fervent support. Earlier that week protesters humiliated the government when they forced their way into the site of a cabinet meeting.

Television cameras caught the deputy prime minister scampering over a ladder with his rump in the air to reach an adjacent roof and escape by helicopter like a fat pigeon flying away from a cat. It was a historic mess.

"Arisman. He's the one that was the actor?" Or maybe it was a musician. Simon wasn't sure, and the truth was he didn't care. Unlike Chen, he had no interest in politics. "Listen man, it might be best not to mention specifics of the plan for this week to Pui. She has her reservations."

"She said something?"

"Not exactly." Simon assumed it had to do with her displeasure with his time at the protests but tension had been brewing between them for a while, stress about money, which is why he took what Chen convinced him was the first step to getting back into photojournalism: selling his prized vintage Leica M3 and buying the camera that sat next to him, the D20, which functioned better in the short shutter speed, rapid composition, low-light conditions that photojournalism often entails. Because it was the same model as Chen's there was the added benefit of making it easier for him to give technical pointers to Simon.

Unlike Chen, Simon hadn't attempted to cover hard news for a long time. He never had, really. He got lucky a decade ago by stumbling upon a dramatic scene—Sarawak, a jungle road, a head on a stake at dawn. He won an award for those photos but they represented nothing more to him than a shocking accident. He wanted to make the kind of pictures people hung in their living rooms, not the disposable stuff newspapers printed every day. But the shift toward digital in the last ten years or so had made it difficult to earn much money from any kind of photography, let alone art photography, and while Simon's professional opportunities had shrunk, his financial obligations had grown.

When he and Pui first moved into this small house, with its lushly shaded patio and

spacious garden, it felt full of character and potential. The lemongrass expanded into a generous bush; his chili plants produced with an admirable regularity. Now, the lemongrass suffered from a black mold. The house's low wooden ceiling beams and damp floors of the house, the never-ending siege by termites, made it feel more ramshackle every year. The skeleton of the new apartment tower under construction next door blocked out the sun for most of the afternoon, and on some days the earth-rattling noise woke Ethan from his nap. Simon wanted to move his family to a nicer place, with somewhere other than a concrete driveway for Ethan to play, but he could barely afford the rent where he was. He once tried gingerly raising the subject of the six thousand baht per month they paid to Khun Pa, an acquaintance of Pui's aunt from the provinces who did light housework and helped with Ethan, but Pui reacted with exasperation—it was already embarrassing that they paid Khun Pa so little, she said, and they were lucky that she continued the arrangement at all.

There was no way around it: Simon needed to find a way to sell some work. His friend Ian, a photo editor at *Time*, had recently done Simon a favor by publishing one of his portraits of a Red Shirt leader as a thumbnail, and he told Simon that he'd do his best to get him more commissions if he wanted them. That was where Chen came in: he offered to help Simon navigate the protests. He knew the major players, and besides, there was safety in numbers.

"I like it out here at night," Chen said. "You've got the walls, but you almost feel like anyone could come walking in through the leaves. It's kind of creepy, in a good way."

They could smell Pui's curry from the open window.

Simon walked over to his naga jolokia pepper plant and picked one off the vine. "This is what Pui's using to make the curry," he said. "It's one of the hottest in the world." He pulled out a pocket knife and cut it in half. "Run your fingertip along the edge. Just the edge, there, and

then touch it to your tongue." Chen looked at him with questioning eyebrows before doing as he was told.

"Don't really feel anything," he said.

"You will in a minute. Help yourself to another drink."

Simon excused himself to go inside and check on Ethan. Upstairs, he turned off the hall light before entering the boy's bedroom. He slept on a mattress on the floor that had been there from the time he was still in his cradle, and he would cry unceasingly—a soul-deep, existential cry—until Simon or Pui came in and stayed with him in the room. Simon had brought in the mattress to give himself a way to lie down while he waited for the boy to go back to sleep. The mattress remained, along with Ethan's dependency on the presence of his father at night—if Ethan woke to find himself alone, he was distraught—and so a ritual was cemented whereby Simon slept on the floor next to his son, while Pui had their big bed to herself. Ethan was two and a half now. He slept with his blanket kicked to a bundle at his feet, his limbs splayed across the mattress. His little torso rose and fell; a few strands of his dark hair clung to his temples where he perspired. He was a handsome boy; he looked entirely like Pui, and Simon was glad for it. Most nights the father and son slept together until morning (in the past Simon occasionally woke in the early hours and moved to his own bed, but rarely anymore). He didn't mind it. In fact, he enjoyed it. In the fogginess of the middle of the night, after the disoriented feeling of waking on the floor that never went away, there was something deeply comforting about having the warm toddler curled into his chest—about, even, the surprisingly forceful blows from his unconscious, tossing limbs. Simon felt like he had internalized what most parents don't until their second or third child: that these moments of waking up to a corner of his t-shirt gripped into a tiny ball in a palm, to the smell of baby sweat from behind the child's neck—these were finite.

There was a catch in Ethan's breath. Simon wondered about his dreams. Were they vivid and beautiful? Viewed from the floor or the sky? He wondered if the boy ever had nightmares, and if so, what shape they took.

The most frightening dream Simon ever had, he had was when he was five. They were visiting his uncle and aunt's house in Pennsylvania, and he had been put in a strange bed, the sheets crisp and metallic-smelling, while the adults remained talking in the living room below. It was summer, so it was not yet dark when he'd gone to sleep, but it was dark when he woke in a deep, hyperventilating state of fear. The dream was completely abstract, which somehow accentuated its power—a vortex of swirling of color and discordant sound. In his terror he didn't want to step down onto the floor for fear it would shift under his feet, and yet he also did not want to remain alone in that bed. He thought of it now as a very particular fear of the unknown: his first fear of madness, experienced as a toddler and made more terrible for his never having been aware that it was a possibility.

Downstairs, Chen was in the kitchen talking to Pui. He leaned with his back against the counter, drink in his hand, looking at Pui as if waiting for an answer. Pui had her back to the door, so Simon couldn't see her expression, but she slammed the pot of rice down on the counter in a way that Simon recognized as a sign of frustration.

"Need a hand?" he said, and she turned to look at him, startled. Simon scanned her face. He had the impression that she tolerated Chen's presence but didn't fully like him—she became short when he was around, withdrawn and tense. She was too polite to say this directly and he hoped Chen wasn't making the situation worse.

"Say cheese," Simon said, holding up his Nikon. Chen smiled but Pui put up her hand to stay stop.

“Simon, don’t. You know I hate having my picture taken.” He relented and took a picture of the curry instead.

Chen took the rice and Simon brought out napkins and glasses for water. At the table he lit two tealight candles they kept there, in the hope that the warm light would relax his wife. When Pui joined them and everything was in place, Simon spooned out plates of the red duck curry and they gave a toast of thanks to the chef.

“Did I just hear Ethan?” Pui said before taking her first bite. “I should check on him.” She started to rise from her seat but Simon reached out and gently placed his hand on her forearm.

“I just did, Dear. He’s fine. Let’s eat.”

“Smells fantastic,” Chen said. “You were right, by the way, Simon. I felt that pepper creep up my lip. It’s like an anesthetic—my nose is a little numb.”

“I used the smallest amount in a huge pot,” Pui said.

“Haven’t had red curry in a while,” Chen said. “Is that a political statement?”

“You wish,” Pui said. She wasn’t smiling. She rubbed her eye as if it was irritated. Simon felt a strange sensation in his eyes too.

“Tastes good,” Chen persisted. “Like freedom.”

“Better than yellow?” she said, with a note of bitterness.

“All right,” Simon said. “Enough politics.”

Chen laughed. “Pui, you know I’m joking.” He rubbed his right eye.

The dutiful rotating fan cast an arc of a breeze between them, but the room still felt hot. They never ran their air conditioning anymore, except in Ethan’s bedroom.

“Tomorrow could be good,” Chen said. “If the military tries to move in, there could be

trouble." As soon as he said it his face dropped. He glanced from Pui to Simon.

Simon felt a prickly sensation in his eyes.

"Their speech is so ugly," Pui said. "All the time, every day, just shouting, making threats, tearing down the country. It's too much."

"Too much to ask for democracy?" Chen asked, with a smile.

Pui furrowed her brow and rolled her eyes. "You don't have to listen to it all day."

"I've been there a lot of days. Up close."

"You don't know—you think it's just democracy. It's not."

"The PAD says people from Isaan shouldn't even get to vote," Chen said. "That's feudal."

"It's ugly," she said. "You don't hear it, in Thai. Those people are like animals—not all of the protesters, some do believe they can make a better future, I know. They just came down to support what they think is the good thing. Support their people. But those guys on stage, they're just like puppets, I mean—you know what I mean—the people who control the puppets, filling everybody with anger."

"They—"

"No! You don't know, Chen. It's like a different language they speak. It's hurting the country. They said today about there will be *blood on the street. A city on fire*. How is that democracy?" When she said "blood on the street" her voice quavered with such strength of emotion that Simon and Chen looked down at their plates. Chen wisely stopped pressing the point. She would not call herself a Yellow Shirt, but the last year or so had had a way of forcing people to take a side.

After a pause long enough to serve as punctuation, Simon changed the subject.

“Any ladies in your life these days?”

Pui’s glanced up at Chen, her eyes still watery. He looked at her as if he wanted to apologize for the turn into politics, but he didn’t. Instead he exhaled and took a more upbeat tone and said, “There are ladies, and there aren’t. None worth mentioning.”

Simon scooped up a big spoonful of curry, having already separated the elastic duck skin from the slices of breast.

“Please, do mention. Let us married people live vicariously through your single man’s adventures.”

Chen looked at Pui again, clearly hesitant to wade into another topic she might find offensive.

“You know, same same,” he said.

“That stewardess friend of Pui’s thinks you’re cute.”

“It starts out as fun and ends with—”

Pui’s spoon clinked hard on her plate as she stood up. “He doesn’t want to talk about it,” she said to Simon. “You can go out yourself if you want to know about that.” She picked up her plate and took it to the kitchen. He knew she was angry, but he was surprised to see her on the verge of tears.

Simon made an expression of mock-alarm for Chen’s benefit. “I hate politics. More rice?” Sounds of dishes striking each other in the sink came from the kitchen. After a moment, he said, “Don’t worry, she likes you. She tells me all the time: you should be more like Chen, he doesn’t think so much.” In fact she had only said that once, but Simon exaggerated to make his guest feel more comfortable.

“That was before this red-yellow thing.”

"I'm having some sort of reaction." Simon said, rubbing his eyes again. "I think it's from the prospect of ten more hours of speeches tomorrow."

As they ate, they discussed the plan for the next day. They'd go back to the stage site at Ratchaprasong in the morning, monitor events on Twitter, and move to old town if need be.

"What the hell?" Simon said. "Is this curry…" Both of them were fully tearing up now. Simon put down his fork and spoon. Then, in a moment of recognition, he looked straight across the room. "It's the fucking fan," he said. "Blowing air over that pepper I sliced. Can you feel it in your eyes? It's just air over a sliced vegetable."

"Holy shit, you're right. That is a powerful pepper."

They kept it low for Pui's sake but they laughed now, dabbing their eyes with their napkins, no longer puzzled by their tears.

Pui went to bed before Simon and Chen had finished the dishes. After Chen left, Simon put away the rest of the food and moved the dirty dishes to the kitchen, rinsing them and stacking them in the sink so as not to raise Khun Pa's ire in the morning. Through the open windows the muffled sounds of the protest speeches still competed with the resonant music of the toads in the garden. He could shut the windows but it wouldn't matter—the walls of the house were so thin they did little to insulate them from the outside world. He found the cap for the bottle of gin and straightened the cushions on the chairs. Satisfied with the state of things, he clicked off the lights in each room, the switches discolored from who knew how many decades of use. He'd considered replacing them but he loved the way the old ones felt when pressed. There was a mechanical click to them that gave this nightly ritual a tactile pleasure, accompanied by the briefest of pauses, it seemed, before the light turned on or off. As a baby, Ethan found endless

pleasure in being held up to the switches and making the world go bright or dark—an elated power, no doubt, at an age when so much lies out of reach.

His own father had left the door cracked open for him at night for years longer than Simon's childhood friends', no questions asked, an unspoken agreement between father and son. Never, though, would they have slept in the same room. The floorboards creaked as he opened Ethan's bedroom door. The boy stirred but did not wake.

Taking his place on the mattress on the floor, Simon imagined selling something to Ian. Would he tell Pui right away, or would he wait for a copy of the magazine to arrive and surprise her?

Pui worked for a low-cost regional airline as an air hostess, but, she liked to quip, "Not the soap opera kind." They'd met at a show he had in a gallery less than a year after his return. He approached her that night while she was standing alone in front of his portrait of a Sikh man he taken in a Pahurat warehouse full of Chinese coffins. He was nervous. They both faced the painting. He asked her how she heard about the show.

"Can't you tell?" she said. "That man is my uncle."

He looked at her directly then. Her hair was tied back. There was something in the shape of her face that would have made him believe her, if not for her smirk. She was beautiful in the way of a boyish girl who doesn't fully realize yet how desirable she is, and so had not yet fully inhabited that desirability.

"Tell him I said thanks," he said.

Towards the end of the evening, when he noticed her lingering to look at more of the photos, he broke away from a conversation to speak to her again.

"I'm sorry there are no snacks," he said.

“Do I look hungry?” she said.

“Extremely. It looks like an urgent situation.”

“What did you expect? Half of the people in these photos are eating something.”

“The other half are talking on their phones. I shoot what I see.”

“And what do you see now?” she said, swaying her weight to one foot.

“I see crunchy khaep moo in the very near future.”

“A useful talent.”

“That means I have a total of two, if you like my photos. Ten minutes? The best nam prik num is just around the corner.”

“Around the corner? Is that a prediction or a direction?”

“Both.”

She gave no indication she wanted a family that night, sitting on plastic stools under fluorescent light and smoke from a street vendor’s charcoal grill. No sign that she would have wanted that old, low-ceilinged wooden house or its cheap wooden chairs that could be found at any market, the windows full of unruly plants, the chipped and stained dining room table. All he knew that night was that she claimed to admire not his art, specifically, but the fact that he was an artist. “Everyone has a camera,” she said as they picked politely at their somtam. “Everyone takes pictures. That you do it in your own style is impressive.”

Though she was too young to remember much about Black May, it was fair for her to feel uneasy with the idea of them being at the protests. Simon had considered the story low-risk, but increasingly he also saw her point. In the last week or so, the demonstrations had taken on a threatening aspect. Walking through the Red Shirt camp in the first few months of its existence, he was most often struck by the signs of domesticity: rice cookers and simmering pots, children

chasing each other around scaffolding and tents, old people with sunken lips sitting in circles or napping on mats. But yesterday, in the section that stretched from Ratchaprasong to the makeshift blockades at Silom, he caught the eye of a wiry young man in a red T-shirt too big for him, sitting under a tarp on what used to be the traffic median below the skytrain line, sharpening sticks of bamboo to a fine edge. The man, no older than his early thirties, was completely engrossed in his work, like a grandmother patiently weaving a basket, until, it seemed, he felt Simon staring at him. He looked up with such a cold glare that it gave Simon goose bumps. Next to him, the bushes bristled with more of the sharpened sticks. A few yards farther along even younger men, teenagers, were uprooting paving stones and hammering them them into throwable chunks. That week, the camera of another photographer was stolen right off his neck by a pair of boys on a motorbike who smiled as they sped away, their jackets flapping in the breeze.

If he could sell an image, Pui would be happy about his success. There had been times when taking pictures came easy to him, but he had gone so long without working in this way that he had forgotten what his own process was like. It had been months, even years, since he'd taken a picture that he felt truly good about. This produced in him a moodiness that affected more than just him. If he'd had a good day he was arms-wide enthusiastic about seeing Pui. If not, he struggled to command his body to face her when she came in the room and he was sitting stooped at his desk reading an online newspaper and feeling self-pity or jealously or snobbery at what was getting published in the major magazines and who was exhibiting in New York. Out of embarrassment he clicked away from whatever he was reading and acted as if he were editing photos or writing a query. Pui absorbed his moods with more patience than he deserved, and now, even a good day with his art reminded what it meant to be beholden to it, the sacrifices and consequences.

He rolled over on his side and put his left hand on Ethan's sleeping back. Lying on his front with his arms spread out to each side of him, his son's back rose and fell in determined, steady time. His nostrils, so perfectly formed, the folds like a soft, breathing seashell. And like a seashell, he seemed to emit a quiet but deep echo, a round, compact rumble. It wasn't the sound of the ocean; it also wasn't a purr. Ethan's sound was weighted with more gravel. He had heard that most of the sounds elephants make are inaudible to us—that the high-pitched horn they make when they're in danger or excited is only a small fraction of their range of communication. That in fact there is a whole language, between mothers and children especially, that takes place at a frequency too low for human ears, made not by pushing air through a mouth or a snout but by a complicated vibration, a flexing of muscles that produces this lower frequency, this silent rumbling, a warping of the air. Deep reverberation. He felt sometimes when he entered the steeped coolness of Ethan's room that he could feel a similar sound, reassuring, asserting even while asleep that I am a living, growing thing, and though I will soon require attention, for now you too can relax, hearing with your bones while your conscious mind surrenders to sleep.

Pui was right; these protests were ugly. And Chen was right, too: they were like some sort of necessary growing process: breaking a bone to reset it, tearing the flesh to give birth—both wrong and necessary, inevitable-feeling and at the same time something that could have, should have, been avoided.

The morning rumors of a military dispersal operation at the Ratchaprasong intersection did not come to fruition, so they decided to take the river taxi to the old town in case there was traffic. Sitting on their orange plastic seats, knees touching in the cramped space, Chen checked his phone for Twitter updates while Simon stared out at the Chao Phraya.

"Marshall Landrieu says they've got armed personnel carriers on Ratchadamnoen. '*APCs*.'" Simon said the acronym in mocking tone. "Why does he always have to make his situation sound so dramatic?"

"Because he's a self-important douche." A moment earlier they'd been in the standing section and Chen interrupted Simon where he stood leaning out under the roof of the boat, gazing at the barges carrying crates of cola under tight black tarps, ribbons of water hyacinth floating in the milk coffee-and-milk–colored current and ramshackle houses leaning over the water as if someone had cut away the back of them and made their inner workings transparent: people washing clothes, flushing, disposing of trash. With a nudge Chen interrupted this view to nod gravely at the sign above them, SPACE FOR MONKS, a sign that Simon, like any other resident of the city, had seen and memorized years ago but chose to ignore this time because there were obviously no monks on the boat. The saffron robes were hard to miss. The gravity on Chen's face, the implication of superior assimilation, of spiritual seriousness and depth of respect—and by implication Simon's own lack of assimilation, depth, and respect—got under his skin. But Chen was so nice about it, so sincere and guileless, Simon couldn't point it out, for it would be he who looked like even more of a jerk. Now, he said:

"I can't tell if he's pompous, or insecure, or if those two are the same thing. All I know is that his tweets make me want to punch him in the face."

It was an awkward dance Simon often had to do: many of his Bangkok acquaintances were expat journalists, but whenever he attended, against his better judgment, some event at the Foreign Correspondent's Club, he found himself pinned against the bar by some aging blowhard or young up-and-comer trying to prove something. Everyone knew the *real* story, had spoken to the people who really *matter*, had been to the first to some place when it had been truly

interesting. The self-satisfaction was like a virus everyone had caught; the room hummed with the energy of gossip and boasting and men enjoying the sound of their own voices.

Pui had been short with him that morning, still upset from the night before. They needed a fresh start somehow. He told himself that she was simply worried and everything would be fine when he returned home safely with sellable material.

As the boat passed Wat Arun, the temple's floodlights turned on, though it was not yet dark. The temple was most beautiful at night, Simon thought, when artificial illumination highlighted its shape and gave it texture. What looked like intricate craftsmanship from a distance was, upon closer inspection, actually broken pieces of pottery stuck un-artfully into cement. He wasn't the kind of person whose eye sought out the blemishes in things; he could truly appreciate—was, in that moment, re-appreciating—its sparkling shape. If anything, the biggest obstacle to enjoying a scene was his reflex to filter it through his guidebook-level knowledge of history: sacked Ayuthaya, regicide, the white and green demons standing sentry and staring across the river at Wat Po. But it wasn't *his* temple, he hadn't internalized it, and so the feelings it evoked in him felt shallow or manufactured. Smaller. And yet, more and more, he noticed that after ten years in Thailand he was beginning to experience the layering of memory that made true nostalgia possible.

At the pier Chen made a phone call. Simon leaned over a railing next to a kid who dropped pieces of bread into the river for the huge catfish roiling at the surface. Sliding up out of the water in their floating, striving pile, they were snake-thin and grey-brown when viewed from above, shaped like something slammed in a door. A thick burst of color from the side, the setting sun on their scales the shimmer of an oil slick. When he focused on the point where the bread was dropped Simon saw individuals flopping and rolling over each other to get their bite. But if

he pulled back and viewed them as a group they looked like one big organism with a center and tentacles, newcomers or old hands biding their time on the periphery. At the center, the mass churned in steady unison. He would bring Ethan here one day, he thought, though he wasn't sure if a boy would find it interesting or terrifying.

Standing speechless in his pajamas the night he had his discordant dream of colors and sounds, he failed to explain to his own parents what he'd seen and heard. His mother asked if he'd had a bad dream and he nodded, grateful for her giving a name to what had happened but also pushed even further toward his emotions. He nodded again before giving way to tears. He had been stripped by his fear; robbed of all the little armaments of composure that protected him from feeling like a baby rather than a boy. He'd never met anyone who'd had a dream like that, and, he thought of it now as yet another example of something he would gladly suffer again himself if he could in order to keep his son from having to experience it. He wasn't the kind of person who picked out the blemish in things but the longer he stared at the churning fish the more grotesque the scene became.

He first met Chen at RCA. On a good night you felt like you were at the heart of things, taking in the energy of the crowd like bread from the sky. There was nothing inherently atmospheric about that closed off street—the 1980s architecture was almost aggressively generic—but enough people and loud music can enliven the dreariest of public spaces.

The night Simon met Chen, Simon had been talking to a young woman and her friend who did not seem to be with any larger group. They looked a few years older than most of the crowd at RCA—mid to late twenties, maybe, not much younger than Simon. One of them, the one he spoke to, was wearing—he remembered clearly—a short, straight blond wig, a striking

contrast to her dark eyebrows and the skin above her shiny blue strapless shirt. He said hello in his usual way, a way that, while polite, was also playful, light, enthusiastic even, though also, he felt sure, without any trace of desperation. There was no need for it: they were floating in a sea of twenty-something humanity. So new to the country, he had the advantage of invisibility that comes with being truly alone.

She replied to his hello so immediately that it seemed as if she'd been waiting for him to get the words out, or they were picking up a conversation already begun.

"Where are your friends?" she asked.

Her question pointed, of course, to the *dis*advantage of being alone: the Thai skepticism of loners. Simon was too inexperienced to know to lie and give her the answer that would put her at ease—that they had gone home already because they were tired—so he told her plainly that he was there by himself.

"Can you get me a beer?" she said, without missing a beat. "Just me. My friend doesn't drink." As he turned toward the bar she said, pointing across the crowd, "and meet us at that table."

By the time he made his way back from the bar he couldn't see them where they'd been standing, but the table was still open so he sat down. A few minutes later he was joined by an Asian American man—Simon knew without speaking to him that he was American. He wore scuffed white canvas lace-ups; a tattoo peeked out from under rolled-up sleeves. It was hard for Simon to put his finger on what made him attractive in an effortless way, but the imperfections in his dress only added to the impression. His wrinkled shirt looked neater, somehow, than Simon's dutifully tucked button-down. It was Chen. He, too, had an extra beer in his hand.

"I'm sorry," Chen said. "Is this taken? Someone told me to…"

"No, me too," Simon said. "Have a seat." It could have been awkward, but neither of them, Chen especially, was willing to let his insecurity get the best of him. When ten or fifteen minutes passed and it was clear the blue-shirt blond and her friend would not be joining them, Simon took Chen's extra beer and slid over the one he'd brought. "It looks like we bought each other a round," he said.

Though they spent less time together during the day, he and Chen became co-conspirators at night. They looked out for each other, most of the time. Securing Pui's affections insulated Simon from any jealously he might have felt about Chen's relative success—that first night notwithstanding—with women. He was the kind of guy who got away with being completely honest. He treated women as replaceable, but they always left still holding him in high esteem. There were moments when Simon felt as he imagined some of those women felt: charmed by Chen's generous attention, his guilelessness and ease of manner, despite wondering if he was greedy in the ways that mattered most.

When Simon returned to Thailand after several years back home, things had changed. Chen was still single, but it was as if Chen expected Simon to treat him not like the person he'd met at RCA, but like someone new and more important. A bigger fish in the river.

When they reached Democracy Monument around 7:30 p.m., there was none of the tension that had been reported on Twitter an hour earlier. Instead, a surreal street party was gaining steam. Military trucks played elevator music to calm the crowd. Red Shirt protesters offered bottled water to soldiers standing in front of armored personnel carriers. Then, a Red Shirt truck with much louder speakers mounted to its roof began blaring the movement's rollicking *luk thung* protest anthems. Soldiers looked on as Red Shirts danced like Songkran in

Khon Kaen. On pickup trucks, the steps of the monument, and on the monument itself, they shook their hips, raised their signs, waved their plastic clappers and water-bottle rattles like instruments at the soldiers. The plastic shields they pounded like drums had been captured from riot police earlier in the day. It was defiance through dancing.

Simon followed Chen as he walked briskly through the crowd, snapping shots but not stopping to linger. Simon wiped his face with his shirtsleeve at the faint residue of teargas. Chen turned back to him, leaning in and shouting in his ear over the noise: "Remember what we talked about: crank up the ISO, shoot in RAW, F-stop 1.8 or lower if you can and we'll push the exposure in post. Let's get behind that military position on Dinsaw." The technical advice grated on Simon, but he valued Simon's feel for the scene, which Simon found disorienting. A woman to their left wore a skimpy red tank top, denim shorts, and a black police riot helmet. She was trying to get one of the soldiers to dance, a young man whose helmet teetered on his head. She was no older than twenty-five, but the soldier looked shy and embarrassed to be approached.

"Excuse me," Chen asked in Thai. "Which way is Phan Fah Bridge?" The young solder stared at him, wide-eyed and blank.

"Don't know," he said. "We're not from this city."

We. Up close, all of these soldiers were nervous boys. They were from the same provinces as most of the protesters—the poor and rural north and northeast—and they knew no more about the layout of Bangkok's streets than any tourist.

Turning into Thanon Dinsaw they encountered about thirty feet of completely empty road—a buffer zone before the line of soldiers and vehicles. For the first time Simon felt unsettlingly exposed in a line of fire.

"I'm going to look for Colonel Romklao," Chen said. Despite the fact that they'd moved

farther from Democracy Monument, they still had to shout to hear each other over the loudspeakers and music.

The colonel, distinguished by his green beret, stood between two APCs, and Chen went right up to him as if they'd spoken before. Perhaps they had. Simon walked over to the sidewalk to view the soldiers from a wider angle. He'd taken hardly any photos since they'd arrived, so concerned was he with keeping up with Chen. Simon, valuing quality over quantity, took more time to set up, compose a shot, take a sample, and re-adjust. In an instant the shape of a scene could change dramatically. As the shots he envisioned eluded him, he felt constantly behind both reality and his own vision, unable to catch up with either as they sped on in their separate directions.

He stood between a parked truck and a phone booth. The music and dancing in front of the monument had built to a crescendo. He thought about Chen's suggestion to err on the side of underexposure and adjust it in postproduction. The F-stop setting on the D20 was different than he was used to and tended to underexpose by about half a stop already, he thought, compared to—

A crackle of fireworks from the direction of the crowd. He looked for Chen, who in an instant had stopped speaking to the colonel and faced forward with his camera poised. He raised one arm horizontally in Simon's direction, waving palm-down like a swimmer treading water. The fireworks grew more intense, like popcorn in a metal pot, until they drowned out the music. When the soldiers shot their rifles in the air Simon flinched and crouched by the side of the truck. He wasn't hearing fireworks, he realized, but gunfire.

And yet it did not occur to him that the uniformed body that collapsed beside him had been struck with a bullet. To Simon the man was sitting down, taking a rest, overcome with

fatigue or discombobulation.

In an instant the buffer of empty road shrank; protesters threw chairs, pipes, pieces of wood in their direction. Bags of chilies soaked in fish sauce and cooking oil. Two Molotov cocktails crashed in the street in front of the soldiers; one set a patch of cement aflame.

The percussion of the soldiers' guns made Simon go to his knees, but it was the other sound, the pluck, pluck, pluck like the sound of rubber bands snapping in the distance that terrified him, because that was the sound of *incoming* fire. As he lay on his stomach and shimmied under the truck, a gut-churning boom gripped his sternum like something rising out of the pavement. Sparks landed near his face. The phalanx of armored soldiers shook loose like a cube of sugar breaking up in hot tea. Another explosion and Simon pressed his cheek to the inside of a tire, curled his legs up into his chest. He heard the phone booth shatter, weapons flung scraping across the street, young men panicking, voices calling for the medic. One of them called for his mother.

From underneath the truck he saw, at the edge of the scene, along the side by the shuttered-up shophouses, Red Shirt legs taking tentative but steady steps forward, reclaiming ground. Someone was shouting in a loudspeaker in Thai, urging the crowd to attack. Two men wore bandanas over their faces but no shirts at all, their jeans hanging low off their skinny hips. To his right there was wailing.

He came out from under the truck during what sounded like a lull and he saw the camera before he saw the outstretched arm or the softly curled fingers of the hand below the tattoo. Another burst of crackling and he wondered how his own camera made it over there, before he registered the dark slick of blood or Chen's body lying semi-hidden near another vehicle, twisted in an unnatural position. *I must straighten him out*, Simon thought. *He will appreciate my help*.

The camera had been thrown yards from Chen's body. Reflexively, Simon picked it up first. He began to approach, the wet midnight blue in which Chen lay shifting to a deep maroon under the streetlamp. He shrank at the crack of more shots and in flashes of extra light that deep maroon took on edges of scarlet, glassy and almost white where it caught the light. His friend's midriff was a broken bowl of organs in viscous oil.

Amazingly, a crowd of spectators—foreigners—had gathered at the corner of a distant side street. He ran for them, both cameras around his neck. When he reached the crowd it parted as if by command; it was not until he had walked for nearly thirty minutes in the direction of Hualampong train station that he looked down and saw that he was stained with another man's blood.

He expected Pui to be waiting up for him, but when he reached their house after a taxi ride in which he could not, despite the driver's nervous insistence on conversation, form the syllables of a single word, he found her asleep in their bed with the lights on and a book resting on her stomach. If it was possible for her face look angelic and concerned at the same time she looked like that now—even in the way her arm appeared to be still clutching her book, as if some one might sneak in and take it away. He was wrong to laugh off her concern about the danger of the protest, and not because she had been proven so right but because in dismissing her he failed to acknowledge that her concern was a manifestation of her love for him and for Ethan. He thought of waking her, of crawling in behind her and putting his arm around her and squeezing her the way he'd wanted to squeeze that tire when he was too paralyzed to open his eyes. A rising sense of shame stopped him. Slowly, as he thawed from his state of shock, he confronted images of himself under pressure and they were not flattering.

He didn't know where he would begin. He took off his stained shirt, threw it on the floor of his office. Regardless of where he started the story, the only possible end was with Chen's torn body, lying in the gutter.

He picked up his phone to call . . . whom? A hospital? The police? He considered calling the president of the Foreign Correspondents' Club, an acquaintance of Chen's, but halted at the idea of the inevitable questions about when and why he left the scene and what he did to look after Chen's body. His addled brain stalled, too, on the question of whether to call his own friends or Chen's, which ushered in him the unwelcome suggestion that none of the people he would normally name as his friends were people who he would feel comfortable calling in a time of crisis.

He opened his laptop, as if it would hold an answer. His photo library was open to a series on rescued stray dogs that seemed absurdly trivial to him now. And then he had another thought: *I am so clearly not a real photographer*. He'd been safe for nearly an hour and he hadn't once looked at the photos he took.

He tried to fit a cable to his camera. His hands shook; they must have been stuttering since Ratchadamnoen. Chen's twin D20 sat on the edge of his desk, lens shattered.

As Simon's pictures loaded, he caught quick glimpses of what he'd shot that night. Even with such a cursory glance, he could tell that his images were of an inchoate crowd of nothing. An amateur could have done better. Many probably did.

An email from Ian waited in his inbox with the subject "Crackdown." Within the hour the first wave of images would start coming over the wire, and within a few hours there would be a flood.

Pui and Ethan each slept soundly in their rooms. His failure doubled itself in his gut. It

would not be like this forever; the boy would become a teenager with his own angst, but for now his family loved him in a way that he had never been loved before. Ethan would not know the difference but his father would not be selling anything for them tonight.

If it was Chen who had lived, if their positions had been reversed, he wouldn't have called the medic either. He may have yelled for help, but only behind his camera. He would have kept shooting. There would be pictures of Simon torn open, beautiful images of his flayed body.

And yet Simon had no photographs of his fallen friend. No proof—

The cracked lens faced him across the table. The switch was still turned to ON, but with no power in the battery.

For a moment Simon didn't move. He broke his gaze to look toward the door that connected the office and their bedroom. He rose to shut it, with care. Returning to the table, he picked up Chen's camera. Though identical to his own in every way, it felt heavier in his hands. Running his finger along the curve of the right side of the body, he traced the raised traction lines on the cover of the slot for the memory card. Pressing in and away with his thumb he felt the spring-loaded pressure of the tiny door push back on him, revealing the thin purple card. As if responding to a medical touch like a tiny bone out of joint, it clicked in and pushed back, happily loose from the camera's grip.

Simon put the card in his reader. On his laptop, he carefully unchecked the "delete images after downloading" box.

Several of the images that steadily filled the screen were nearly as breath-stopping as the explosions they captured. Four, five versions of photographs that each, individually, were as compelling and darkly elegant as anything Simon had seen in months. In one, soldiers in riot gear framed the democracy monument in the distance, but it was the light that was so

remarkable: the stark illumination of the young soldiers' faces, the panic in their eyes. Hot sparks streaked across the corner of the photo like molten iron off a hammer. It must have been taken in the instant a grenade exploded just off frame. How many other cameras had that particular view of the action? How many were positioned for such a shot? Almost none, certainly.

He looked back at Ian's email. It said, *Simon, I told you i'd call, and here i am. Need fullpage asap. Have anything?*

By now, Chen would have been put into an ambulance and driven to a hospital where they would pronounce him dead and begin the process of calling his family.

He opened more of the images in Photoshop.

He couldn't sell them in a set. That would be too much. Chen, though, would give this to him himself if he was there to make the decision. One mere click of a button in a river of clicks. A twitch.

In a few days' time the poor man's mother will have touched down on the runway of Suvarnabhumi. If there is a local Buddhist ceremony she'll be sitting there with the other mourners and payers of respect, listening to the detached chanting of the straight-faced monks and stifling fresh sobs, not only because she lost her son but because he was lost in this way, in this place that will seem so much more strange and unassimilable to her under the stark glare of death.

No one will be looking for deleted images.

For good measure he deleted a few others, near-duplicates whose absence wouldn't result in any real loss of Chen's work. He took the image he wanted and sent it to Ian, with a short note: *Hellish mess out there -- best I've got attached. Am still shaking, Ian. Chen hit if you haven't heard. Had to get out of there so have only this one to send. Trust you will treat it as it*

deserves.

Pui entered rubbing her eyes, the cautious look she had whenever she wasn't wearing her glasses. She saw his shirt on the floor.

"You—what happened? You're bleeding."

"I—there was an accident."

"An accident?"

"At the protest, at, at—" he put his head in his hands. "At Democracy Monument."

"Did you—what happened?" She seemed calmer than he was. She spoke to him in a serious but steady voice. Despite her earlier anxieties, in the face of an emergency she didn't panic. She, not he, was suited to cover hard news in a crisis.

"I'm not bleeding," he said. "It's—they started shooting. We were caught."

"Slow down," she said. "Who fired? Who was caught?" She looked at the second camera on his desk. "Where's Chen?"

"I didn't do anything."

"You didn't do what, Simon?"

He reached haltingly in her direction but she was already taking a half step back as if to survey the scene more fully: Simon's pale torso, brown smudges of blood on his shorts, scattered piles of papers around his computer.

"You're not—why is there so much blood? Where is Ethan?"

Illogically, the mention of Ethan reignited Simon's panic for a brief moment, as if he had left him back at the protest site too. On cue they heard the baby cry, muted from behind the door of his room.

"I don't—I'm fine. I just need a shower and some sleep."

She stepped forward, put her hand on his desk.

"Simon, you're shaking. Look at me. Speak slowly. Tell me what happened." Then, she said, "Where is Chen?"

She had the second camera in her hands now. She touched the broken lens.

"I'm ok," he said. "Chen is dead."

By the following evening, Simon, at Ian's urging, had sent several more photos, for which he would be paid handsomely. Already he was being showered with equal measures of praise and condolence. One of the photos he sent had caused a stir for its depiction of a man in a black shirt and black ski mask holding an AK-47. Journalists and security experts cited it as proof that there had been a highly armed, covert professional element among the Red Shirt protesters that was responsible for the heavy casualties suffered by the military. An editorial in the *Bangkok Post* labeled this shadowy element the "Black Shirts." Several journalists he knew called him to ask for interviews. He was an eyewitness who had put his life on the line for his work.

Before his check even arrived from Time, he went to the Emporium and bought the most expensive stroller they carried. He rang his doorbell to get the attention of Ethan and Pui before entering the house with the big box in his hands—he used his hip to slide around the screen door while purposefully shoving the box through first, with its larger-than-life photo of a blond baby ecstatic and safely strapped in to her new teal-green ride. He put it together immediately, Ethan unaware of what it was of course but, as part of a new stage he was going through, eager to "help" by picking up pieces, immediately handing them to Simon, and running away to applause. Just as quickly he circled back and did it again.

"I can take him on a walk to test this thing out if you want to take a nap," he said to Pui.

She never complained about how exhausting it was to be a flight attendant while raising a child.

"That's fine," she said.

"Don't worry, I'll be careful."

"I know," she said.

The sun shone unfiltered by nothing more than the light haze that always hung over Bangkok. Simon wore his camera around his neck in case he felt inspired. He regretted not bringing a hat, too, but Ethan sat comfortably shaded, kicking his little sandals with delight as they moved toward the market. Simon gently eased the wheels over the numerous cracks in the sidewalk and turned that light jostling, too, into something fun for the boy. At the market they slowed to nearly a stop as foot traffic became constricted under the awnings that covered the sidewalk, giving the street vendors, familiar faces all, a chance to coo at Ethan and squeeze his plump calves.

"He looks cute enough to eat!" said a woman who ran Simon's favorite noodle cart. Older children came over to say hello to Ethan and compliment his new stroller.

When he spoke to his parents in Delaware, Simon had a difficult time explaining how it could be that the dramatic and dangerous scenes they saw playing out on the news were happening less than a mile from his house, yet in the vast majority of the city, including his own neighborhood, people went about their lives as usual. Depending on your point of view, it was a sign of Bangkok's resiliency or apathy.

The woman who served bubble tea said "Ahh!" when she saw Ethan approaching. Simon peaked over the stroller's canopy to see Ethan's facial expression—he was one big drooly grin.

"Aaay," she said again, greeting Ethan like a long-lost friend. She had a single tapioca pearl waiting for him on a spoon. He pounded on his seat with approval.

By the time they got back home he had worked up a good sweat and Ethan was fast asleep in his seatbelt. Simon put him down and joined Pui in the living room, where she folding Ethan's clothes.

"I thought you were going to take a nap?" he said.

"I can't sleep." She folded faster than normal.

"Do you want me to play some classical music?"

"Ethan is asleep."

"Honey, I know you're upset. And you're right. I could have died out there. I'm upset too—I lost a friend."

"A friend?"

"I…I mean, I know we weren't extremely close, but—"

"You're not close to anyone," she said. "Who are you close to?"

He was taken aback.

"I'm…You, and Ethan. You're my world now. And—with a bit more money, after this—my art. I can—"

"Your art!" She snapped a piece of clothing over the laundry basket.

"Pui, I'm sorry this happened, but it's not my fault, and…" He felt himself starting to choke up. He tried to hold it in. "I need your help now. It was horrible."

"Whose camera is that?" She gestured to where he had set his camera on the table.

"It's mine." He met her eyes after a beat, with a puzzled expression.

"The other one. The broken one that was on your desk."

Simon stalled for a moment, to gather words.

"It was sticky, Simon. The bottom was sticky and brown on my fingers from blood."

"You don't know what it was like. I couldn't stay there. I couldn't do anything for him, so I took care of his camera."

"So why do you feel bad? It's obvious, you feel something bad."

"I feel guilty."

"You said it's not your fault."

"It's not rational."

"You can't keep his camera."

"Of course, I know that."

"It's too close to his spirit."

"Pui, I know, but please. I will find a way to give it back, but for now, don't tell anyone. It's important, ok? I feel ashamed about leaving there without him. You have to understand that. Can't you? Let me make peace first."

"His spirit needs peace too. His camera was his eyes and his heart."

Around his neck or in his hands, Simon's camera felt nothing like his heart.

"Promise?" he said.

She nodded, or he thought she did, while pulling out another garment from the basket.

On the morning of Chen's funeral, Pui left early to run errands with Ethan. They agreed to meet at the temple.

Alone in the house, Simon went to the drawer in the filing cabinet where he'd kept Chen's camera. He had resigned himself to taking only two or three more from the crackdown shoot and returning it anonymously to the police. But the drawer was empty, save for a rust-colored birthmark of dried blood on the bottom.

Frantic, he called Pui, but she didn't pick up. He pulled open a smaller drawer where he kept his memory cards and found to his relief that the memory card holder he'd removed from Chen's strap was still there. He doubted there were more on any other card—Chen wouldn't have had time to change one out—but he began looking though them anyway, just in case.

Most of the cards were labeled. They spanned years of work. He ignored the older ones and looked through the most recent. Many of these photos were from days they had covered the Red Shirt protests together; none of it was newsworthy.

Discouraged, he put in the last card, the only one that was unlabeled. Instead, it simply had a diagonal mark in black ink.

His eyes went immediately to the soft, blurry photos in warm yellow light, the ones with skin. The feeling in his chest was similar to the exhilaration at first seeing the crackdown images, but it was accompanied by a nausea this time, because, despite the lack of focus, Pui's face was unmistakable. She was in a bed not their own, smiling, raising her hand against the photo. In another she was saying something to the camera, as if asking a question. He stopped at each one, clicking through them in a sequence, concentrating on her face. He circled through them until he no longer needed the screen to see them.

Extra chairs were set up in rows in the courtyard surrounding the funeral pavilion to accommodate all of the visitors. Big circular bouquets of white flowers lined the walls, each bearing a handwritten banner announcing the sender. There were flowers from the Foreign Correspondent's Club, the various news agencies in town, from individual friends whose names Simon did not recognize.

People mingled as they do at Thai funerals. The body would lay in state for several days

before cremation; as Simon understood it, any merit that was offered on behalf of the deceased would benefit the soul as long as it remained in the body. Pui stood off to the side holding Ethan and chatting with a retired professor—they had acknowledged his arrival with a look from a distance but he had not approached her yet. In the front rows inside the pavilion a small group, all wearing black, sat near an older woman who was curled forward with sobbing, her husband's hand on her back. Someone said that it had taken Chen's parents less than forty-eight hours to make it here from Massachusetts. In his preoccupation Simon had left the house as he was and forgot to wear black or white—he alone broke the dress code in a striped orange shirt and khakis.

At the front of the room, the white coffin lay elevated to eye level on golden cloth behind a huge black-and-white portrait of Chen on an easel. Visitors walked up, knelt, and perhaps said a prayer and made a merit offering of money in an envelope for Chen.

As Simon approached the coffin, he saw that, in addition to the portrait, there were a number of other personal effects set out before it, including Chen's motorcycle helmet and goggles, a statue of the Buddha, and more than one camera, including the D20 with its shattered lens.

As he stood before Chen's coffin, mind racing in front of the huge portrait of Chen smiling, he tried to say a Catholic prayer he'd learned as a boy, but he forgot the words. It would have been natural to try to talk to Chen—to the idea of him, at least—to ask him what to do, to accuse him or apologize, but Simon's mind was elsewhere. He was convinced he could feel people staring into his striped-orange back and thought only about how to compose himself long enough to leave the temple. He started to turn and go before hesitating, turning back, and, with as much tact as he could manage, pulling out his wallet. It held only 200 baht. He glanced over his shoulder, put one of the pink notes in the donation box, and with sheepish solemnity walked back

down the aisle. In the parking lot another photographer tried to hail him with a friendly wave but Simon merely waved back and got into a cab.

The reckoning took sixteen days. It happened with a call from Ian.

"Simon, these guys at the legal department came over and took all of the files. They had me in their office showing me big blown-up corners of a few of those pics you sent. There's a figure in several of them who is hardly noticeable at first, just at the edge."

"And?" Simon said? "Another Black Shirt?"

"Simon, I'm going to ask you something. They want me to set up a conference call with legal and management where we have this conversation together. Before I do, I want to know what you're going to say."

The silence on the line was distorted by the sound of Simon's pulse beating in his ear.

"Simon," Ian said.

"I'm here," he said.

"The figure in the photo is you."

A chill rippled over his back like a cold hand pressing on his bare skin.

"Simon?"

He wasn't sure what he said after that. When he woke on the couch the next morning he wasn't even sure if it had happened, until he saw the article online. The last thing could remember clearly then was asking Ian, to his audible disbelief, if he would be required to return his fee.

The conversation with Pui came earlier, the night of Chen's funeral. He was in his office when she came home. He sat at his desk like an animal in its burrow.

When they argued, it was her, not him, who was furious and sad. He fixated on what she was saying in the photo, what question she was asking to the camera.

"It was more than three years ago," she said, driven to agitation by his detached interrogation.

"Why did you let him take those pictures?"

He cried too, but not in the full-throttle way that she did, leaning against the wall in the corner, banging her fists on her thighs, slumping to the floor. There was no sense to it, no through-line of conversation.

He told her that he had sacrificed. He implied she had been a compromise, that she embarrassed him when she spoke in groups.

He remained at his desk for the whole thing; she got up from the floor to throw books and pace. When Simon thought the fight was over, she walked up to him with quiet composure.

"You have nothing," she said, and repeated it: "*You have nothing*."

The comment cut him. He had no reply. It made no rational sense. He had Ethan, and her, despite everything—he would not stay jealous of a dead man. And the few things he'd accumulated. A few pictures, surely, he was proud he'd made. But she said it again with cold conviction as she walked away, as if realizing the depth of its truth for herself.

It was a question he'd never considered before, not in this way. *What did he have?* His life until then, though not without loneliness, had always felt full of substance. As the following months unfolded, as he was publicly rebuked and humiliated, his few remaining acquaintances distanced themselves. He stopped receiving texts, except from journalists he'd never known personally. Pui left him, taking Ethan with her, telling him it would only be for a while. But as

that “while” attenuated itself and emptied like a hollow space to encompass most of a year; as kept his shades drawn for days at a time, as she refused, out of pride or because she had some other source, to ask for money, accepting it when he sent it but never making a formal request; as he heard, second-hand through Khun Pa that she was planning to take them to the U.S. but, apparently, not to visit Simon’s parents, Ethan’s grandparents; as a creeping suspicion he did not want to name surfaced and became hard to suppress after she told him, like a throwaway comment during a phone conversation ostensibly about Ethan’s pre-school, that she confirmed she would be going not to Delaware but to Massachusetts, and that no, she didn’t need any extra money for the trip; as all these things happened and he felt himself drifting farther from any grasp on what inspired him, from any lingering scent of motivation, he let that question settle into his apartment like an unwelcome guest. What did he have now, and what had he had all along? He kept his shades drawn for days at a time now. Because he no longer had the energy to make small talk with everyone at the market, he ate the same greasy krapow with a rubbery egg, sometimes twice a day, from his least favorite vendor, the one who had ceased to acknowledge him directly since he committed some forgettable slight more than a year ago. He went to the grocery store late at night, buying only water. If he watered his plants he felt like the day had been productive.

Hunched over his desk, he trod the same worn path through the Facebook pages of Bangkok-based journalists who had interviewed him about Chen’s death. He’d prioritized giving interviews to people he knew. It was incomprehensible to him how they could simply move on and continue to cover a new angle or a new story, day after day. What value did it have beyond a shallow chronicling, like reporting the weather?

Scratching his head, swatting dandruff off his keyboard, he re-read the articles in which

he'd been quoted as if he was reading them for the first time, as if he was looking for clues about the motives of an acquaintance's behavior. The Bangkok Pundit blog was first to broach the subject of the affair. It quickly spread to Twitter. His supposed motives elucidated in 140 characters. "Photo theft was revenge," one re-tweeting freelancer wrote, simplifying an already inaccurate conclusion. How could he possibly respond? That his motives for his theft were pure? In their hearts the real photographers, at least some of them, knew it was true. There was something noble in aspiring to publish something great. His was an entirely different kind of human flaw than what was being depicted—one more related to hubris than to petty revenge. That it led him directly to the poison knowledge of Pui's affair was nothing more than cruel irony. What would they say if they knew the truth—that if he hadn't wanted to come through for her so badly he may have never learned about the ways that he had already lost her?

Sitting at his table with a Styrofoam box of hardened rice from his fridge, Simon finally gave in to Pui's question and, along with it, his own sorrow. Here, now: what did he have? The back of his hands against Ethan's soft belly as he leaned in strap him in to his stroller? Did he have that? He ran her question through the clogged filter of his addled brain, his longing for his past life like a numb throbbing. What was his? He would abandon this place again he knew, had known it perhaps from the moment he was free from that chaos last April.

Starting over seemed out of the question. Starting anything seemed impossible. He would return home alone. He hoped merely to put these questions behind him, to cease his circular gnawing on them, and to reconstitute himself as something more than a disarray of parts, something unequivocally his own.

On Facebook he learned that the Foreign Correspondent's Club planned a panel discussion

titled “Conflict of Interest in a Conflict Zone: Ethics and Appropriation in the Digital Age.” The flyer for the event made its subject explicit: him, and the photos he sent to *Time*. Ian was a panelist.

On the top floor of the Maneeya building, two young Thai women who looked like interns sat behind a table at the glass doors of the club. Spread out on their table was a sign-in sheet, blank name tags, colored flyers, and a large glass bowl half-filled with name cards.

“Excuse me—” one said meekly as he walked past them, ignoring them and their entry fee, knowing they would be too polite to confront him.

A hush rolled through the crowd at the bar as he moved toward the far end of the room, where the panel was set up on low stage in front of small tables covered with white tablecloths. On the wall above, several TV screens broadcast a shaky image of them as an in-house cameraman adjusted the frame. Simon took the last unoccupied seat, against the wall at the front—reserved, apparently, by a woman’s handbag. Confident that whomever it belonged to wouldn’t try to approach him, he moved it to the next table. These were the small pleasures of being a pariah.

The panelists were in their places. Ian made eye contact. Simon thought he caught a note of compassion in his look, but there was no familiarity. They hadn’t spoken since the company’s lawyers took over the case.

As the moderator introduced the event from the podium, he seemed acutely aware of Simon’s presence. He felt himself exerting a gravitational force on the experts as they spoke, forcing them to alter their language in small ways, to couch their opinions. There was none of the blood-in-the-water energy that often characterized these events, and the initial presentations—which included an account by Ian of his communication with Simon and his initial impression of

the photos he'd sent (he used the words "elite quality")—were short. Simon listened with detached interest, keeping his focus on the panel, never turning to look at the room of journalists behind him, a crowd that included so many familiar faces but not a single friend.

The moderator opened the floor for questions. The first came from a tall, overweight young man with a sparse beard. His khaki button-up shirt hung untucked over his jeans and he was prematurely balding. He exhaled percussively into the mic before he spoke.

"Francois Gregory, *The Nation*. My question is for Simon." The room buzzed with chatter. The young man leaned even closer to the mic and made himself heard. "Do you regret what you did?"

"I don't know if Simon is taking questions," the moderator said nervously, glancing obliquely in Simon's direction with an incongruous smile. There was an awkward silence as Simon sat in his seat, scratching his neck. In the vacuum the questioner's initial bravado slowly transformed into an embarrassed smile of his own, as if he was trying to pivot his initial seriousness into something like a public gag. Simon looked at Ian, who seemed the least uncomfortable of all the panelists. The crowd around the bar in the back half of the room grew louder with the din of muttering until Simon stood up, commanding complete silence. He faced his questioner.

"Chen was my friend," he said. "We helped each other. He helped me, mostly. What was your question?" He noticed he was squeezing a cloth napkin in his hands, and, as if in a dream, his grip felt tenuous. He continued lest he lose momentum. "Would I do it again? Given the same circumstances? Maybe. Maybe I would. I don't know." He saw himself on the screens out of the corner of his eye, moving in and out of focus. There was more noise from the back. He put the napkin on the table. Someone handed him a microphone. "Do I wish I were someone else? No,

not really. What are we debating here? What are we doing? I won't miss journalism." His voice cracked. He breathed and recovered. "I was never a journalist. Which is why I'm the only person in this room who can be honest. Maybe I would do it again, yeah, except maybe no one would have ever realized the difference. Nobody knows what Chen would have wanted, but I have as good an idea as anybody, and I'm saying he would have found this whole thing a joke. The whole thing."

He had no idea if he believed the last part. He had already forgotten what he said in the beginning. It was all adrenaline. But he liked how it sounded coming out of his mouth. Without sitting back down he started back for the door, shuffling his way past chairs and tables and faces gawking up at him. In the bar area he heard someone hissing from the corner. The moderator said something Simon couldn't hear. More people joined the booing and it spread through the back section of the room with the bar, near the door, toward which he was moving.

He had never been booed before. Rather than feeling shamed by it entirely, he found himself strangely inflated by it. Rather than walk more quickly, he slowed down. His vision was a blur, the crowd an inchoate streak with no distinguishable faces. In that sense it was like the night on Rachadamneon. But rather than wanting to crawl on his hands and knees, rather than wanting to prostrate in the gutter and wrap his arms around a tire, he felt buoyed by the attention. He must have had a smirk on his face, because he heard someone to his left, someone at the section of the bar where the old hands usually sat, say, "He's fucking smiling. Bloody hell." A piece of popcorn bounced off his shoulder and landed on the carpet—he looked back in the direction from which it came. A wadded up piece of paper rolled past his feet as he grabbed his umbrella. The whole crowd was booing now. His vision begun to blur with tears. He stopped by the door, where the two interns at the table sat staring at him and the scene in disbelief; they had

no idea who he was or how it had come to this. A drip of snot fell onto the stack of flyers when he went pick one up. It featured a black and white reproduction of the photo that had started it all. In a fluid motion he wiped his face, signed it, folded it over, dropped it in the glass bowl, and walked out into the hall where the elevator stood open and ready to take him back down to the ground.

Until the New Season Is Born

Even without Sonya's help, I could find G.O.D. through the narrow tunnel of a nearly-hidden soi off Silom. Inside, it wasn't easy, but I didn't mind squeezing through the mass of bodies at the bar to order a drink. The hardest part about attending the ladyboy cabaret on Thursday night, though, was knowing how to compose my face once the lights dimmed, the music began, and the stage filled with glittering slivers of bikini, plumes of feathers, and those charismatic presences, those divas who glided across the stage and looked out on the crowd as if they owned us all.

My face was a problem on this particular night at G.O.D.—the acronym stood for Guys On Display—because Sonya clearly wanted to make a good impression on Mina, our first real prospect for a friend since we'd moved to Bangkok in August. We had acquaintances, sure, but it was November now, and I could feel Sonya losing patience with the claustrophobic aspects of our life together in that city. I could see these shifts in her mood before she saw them herself sometimes, so she didn't need to say anything more than she already had about courting Mina as a friend.

We were early for the show but the line at the bar was already three or four deep. Aside from a few white supporting pillars it was an open plan—no seats, just an expanse of polished concrete floor between the bar and the stage. Above, the railing of a second-floor balcony level

wrapped an oval around the whole room. I took orders and began the slow process of filtering through the crowd of men in tight jeans and gelled hair. Playing dumb, I smiled amiably at a few lascivious stares as if we shared an inside joke and I was oblivious to what they wanted. The white guys were a relief; they nodded politely and ignored me. I didn't resent attention, even if the occasional brush of a hand on my body put me on edge. But most of the contact felt less aggressive than what you might find in, say, a bar full of prostitutes, where you could expect the scratch of nails down your back or the grabbing of your wrist. The clientele at G.O.D. was about half Thai and half farang, almost all gay men who looked like men. I don't think Mina had ever seen the show, but Sonya was part of a loyal following that the cabaret enjoyed in those days. It was 2004, the height of the Thaksin years, when, according to long-time residents, Bangkok felt relatively tame, if also less interesting than it used to be. But expats always say that, in every foreign city that's ever been interesting at all.

I slid sideways into a narrow opening at the bar and waited for service, facing a jaded-looking fifty-ish blond man who stood next to his boyfriend with his back to the bartender. Unlike the cabarets at places like Mambo in Washington Square that attracted fleets of tour buses every night, the show at G.O.D. wasn't especially tourist-friendly. Which was fine with us, although it did make me puzzled about who the ladyboys were performing for, since gay men and ladyboys didn't mix sexually or even socially very much, from what I understood.

Because I wasn't confident in my understanding of its nuances of meaning, I rarely used the word *kathoey*, the Thai word for the "third gender." I could barely order noodles at a street stall with my Thai, so I certainly wasn't able to remember the terms that the ladies themselves preferred the most, words meaning "transformed goddess" or "a second type of woman." I never directly asked Sonya why she liked these shows, but I assumed it had something to do with the

fact that when they weren't on stage most of the performers were sex workers at places like DreamBoys or Jupiter's on Soi Twilight. Sonya worked at a local NGO where she managed HIV prevention and education projects for wages that seemed to me almost unethically low: 20,000 baht a month, or $500 at 2004 exchange rates. According to her, a select few of the most famous ladyboys in the city could command that much in a single night as freelance escorts.

Paltry as it was, Sonya's salary was the only one we had. We came to Bangkok in the first place because I got a short-term contract with an election monitoring organization, but when the election was postponed the contract became even shorter-term than expected, and I hadn't been able to find more work. Sonya took the Raks Thai job as a stop-gap until something better opened up, but nothing had so far, and even small expenses, like the 200 baht cover charge at the door that night or a round of drinks, stung us more than any other westerners we knew. Why we chose to remain in Bangkok is a more complicated question. There was an inertia to life there; it wasn't like we woke up one morning and decided to commit to it. Money aside, Sonya liked her projects at Raks Thai and we were aware of so many people with well-paying NGO work in Thailand that it seemed at first like it was only a matter of time that something would materialize for both of us. In the meantime, for Sonya the idea that she was doing important work—or more fundamentally, that she was a good person—was enough to fuel her for a while, even as the frustration and insecurity of being short on money from month to month seemed to make her a progressively more unhappy person. So that was one reason she liked the cabaret: it reinforced her image of who she was and who she wanted to be.

From across the room I could see her talking excitedly to Mina, pointing at the setup, reveling in her element. Was her enthusiasm genuine, or an exercise in political correctness? And what was the "correct" attitude to adopt toward these performers? I wanted to know for my own

benefit—should I be impressed by how much they looked like women? Should I find them sexy? Amusing? Sonya's response to it all was almost warm and fuzzy, but I couldn't relate to that. I supported anyone's right to make a life choice in theory, but I didn't need to show up as a gesture of support to strangers. We wouldn't go to a club and watch straight women cover Whitney Houston and Celine Dion, so it wasn't about the music. In fact, many of the gay men looked like they were just waiting for the DJ to come on after the show. Sonya also liked to go to go-go bars—when her mom was in town Sonya insisted that we take her to a show on Patpong where girls got down on all fours with nothing but a plastic tube and some darts. Middle-aged sex tourists sitting 20 feet away in the back row jumped in their seats at the balloons popping just inches above their heads.

I appreciated Sonya's sociological interest in these expeditions, but I also took pleasure in the prurience in a way that I would never admit to her. Her presence removed a certain amount of hassle, embarrassment, and guilt. It was almost as if that was her way of dealing with the classic problem of being a white woman in Bangkok: the cultural attitudes toward sex and monogamy that eventually make cynics of so many women because those attitudes exert a gravitational force that distorts every other kind of relationship, even non-sexual ones, over time. Some relationships adapt and some thrive on it; others do not. Perhaps Sonya was heading off that state of affairs by making the go-go bars acceptable entertainment on her own terms. And yet she was not unadventurous or moralistic—it wasn't entirely clear to me what those terms were.

Mina, a lifetime resident of the city, was easily one of the most social—and, judging by her own stories, sexually voracious—people I had ever met. Watching Sonya hold her own with her—they were leaning against each other now and doubled up laughing—it struck me that

Sonya's solution to the problem of being a woman in Bangkok might be closer to Mina's than I gave her credit for. There was something almost ominous in how Sonya seemed unaffected by sexual insecurity.

And while I could never have articulated it at the time, something about her enthusiasm for these nights at the cabaret felt ominous too. Maybe she did enjoy the scene as an extension of professional interests, but it seems to me now that these nights were a kind of challenge to me, even if Sonya wasn't fully aware of it. I think she understood on some level the pressure this particular environment put on me; she enjoyed how it troubled me in ways that took a tremendous amount of psychic energy for me to hide. Which brings me back to my face. I think Sonya enjoyed the fact that I didn't always know where or how to look at the transformed goddesses on stage.

My three drinks in hand, I picked my way back to the two of them.

"Thank you, sir," Mina said, with her handsome, broad smile and what I had come to see as her trademark expression: a bemused look at the beginning of the night that seemed to promise a total acceptance of the morning-after embarrassment that was sure to come with whatever happened in between. In her body language she reminded me of a bachelor who had long ago found peace with his own superficial desires. Though she had begun to show a little of the extra weight of her late thirties, she wore it well, usually in a simple black dress. She was born in Bangkok to American parents and never left, with the exception of four years of college at Berkeley. She ran a popular map business with her mother—highly colorful, retro-hippie-style drawings of the city that looked like the kind of thing an obsessive friend would make for you if you were visiting. It would be several years before Google began mapping every street on earth, and no one anticipated then how the world would change. It was right there in front of us if we

wanted to read about the way things were heading, but just as Mina was not one of those westerners (her Thai passport notwithstanding, she was indeed a westerner) who longed for the past, she wasn't about to change her whole life on a prediction about the future. She was too busy using her charm and knowledge of the city to pursue the never-ending stream of twenty-something backpackers passing through. The first time I had a sense that she might like us enough to invest time into getting to know us as real friends was when she told us something that, she said, almost no one else knew: she was the anonymous author of the "Khaosan Stalker" sex column in *Farang* magazine, one of the city's most entertaining reads every month. In any case, even if her map business had gone under, Mina would have been fine. Her father was a successful lawyer in town and, unlike us, a few Heinekens and a cover charge was not an expense that she thought twice about. She offered the lip of her beer to us as a toast.

"So many hot guys. So much wasted testosterone," Mina said. We all had to shout to be heard over the music they played while we were waiting for the show. "But at least there's something to look at."

"Guys On Display," I said.

"What's that?"

"*Guys On Display*!" Sonya shouted.

Leaning into us, Mina said, "I like more chest hair. Or *any* chest hair." She still wasn't sure if we heard her, so she smiled and ran a finger down the middle of her own tanned and freckled chest.

Then the floor went dark, bright lights illuminated the stage, and an extended version of the opening flourish of Gloria Naylor's "I Will Survive" trilled from an unseen piano. Most people stopped talking. Sonya maneuvered forward for a clear line of sight. Mina and I followed

and stood behind her. The curtain rose to reveal a singer with gleaming skin staring up at the balcony level of the club, her breasts pressed precariously under two vertical strips of a dress that dropped in a massive V-shape from her shoulders to below her belly button. I leaned to the side and lifted up an inch on my toes. Mina took out her flip phone to send a text.

Does it matter that all of this—this whole story that I have begun to tell—happened before each of us could find anyone else with a few taps of a thumb on the device in our pocket? Before anyone could be lost, anonymous, or hidden? Probably, yes. People still get lost these days; it's just more obvious that, whether they want to admit it or not, they do so by choice.

The singer in the V-shaped dress now moved in sync to a full ensemble of backup dancers whose outfits resembled hers. She towered over all of them by at least a head, as if she had given birth to a nest-ful of slightly less magnificent versions of herself. The little things set her apart—the way she popped her hip when she changed directions on the stage; the flick of her hand when she brushed her hair back from her face. Despite my enjoyment of the spectacle, the usual uneasiness returned. I hoped Mina wouldn't look over at me to glimpse my reaction, because I was sure that whatever it was, it was off somehow.

The feeling reminded me of the first time I went to a strip club in college with a group of friends. Consumed with uncertainty about where to look and how, I slouched in my chair and tried to disappear. It may be generous to call a strip club a social situation, but there is a language to it, and through the haze and paranoia of my dull schwag high I did not know how to receive that communication. Should I maintain an ironic distance? I didn't *want* to be amused, I wanted to be serious because my interest in those bodies was entirely serious, but I feared that staring might look creepy or threatening. Or might it be flattering? Was I not supposed to find the bodies

attractive? Is that not why we were there? When a dancer straddled and faced away from me during the lap dance my roommates paid for, when she pulled her bikini bottom below her thighs before arching her spine and touching her shins, I felt my face contort into a thousand expressions at once, cycling through every look that felt remotely appropriate in that instant. We must have looked like children at the carnival, but afterwards, that dancer—they all seemed so much older than us, though they probably weren't—told me that I looked "intense," and that she liked it. Maybe she wanted a tip; maybe she felt compassion and wanted to put me at ease.

At these cabaret shows I had a similar set of feelings, perhaps even more complicated. On stage, a new singer moved athletically in an American flag two-piece and a long fur coat that she jettisoned as she ramped up into the refrain of her number. I thought I saw a dark sliver of her areolae peek out from beneath her top, but it was hard to tell from our angle. If so she was oblivious, engrossed in her routine.

Mina turned to me. "Do you find this arousing?"

I laughed. "Am I supposed to?"

"Depends how open-minded your girlfriend is."

"Do you?" I asked.

"Do I what?"

"Do you find this arousing?" It felt inane as soon as I said it. It was clear from her restlessness that she did not.

"I prefer my dicks *sans* tits and glitter," she said. "I like them attached to something rougher around the edges."

As the number concluded, Sonya clapped generously in front of us.

"If you like rough, I heard there's an S&M club off Soi 4," I said.

“I’m a local who has a sex column and makes maps for a living,” Mina said. “It’s gonna be hard for you to introduce me to new venues. Ask me about pulling on Mick Jagger’s string sometime.”

I smiled. That was the thing about trying to make new friends here: we had no stories, no cryptic references or inside jokes. No cache. We got excited about ladyboy cabaret.

“But I’m happy to take you there if you want,” Mina said, playfully conspiratorial.

“Whips and things? I prefer a gentler approach,” I said.

“Aw, poor guy. You mean like feathers?”

“I can do feathers,” I said.

A member of the bar staff tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a beer. In explanation he pointed to a Thai man across the room with neatly combed hair, in a white button-up shirt and jeans. He smiled and raised his glass. His face was eerily familiar, but I couldn’t place it.

“A friend of yours?” Mina said.

“I don’t think I—oh, shit,” I said. “Yes I do. That’s my doctor.”

“He’s not very shy,” Mina said. “He looks happy to see you. Are you sure he’s only your doctor?”

I moved closer to Sonya and waived to him to say thanks.

“You should go thank him up close,” Mina said, smiling. Sonya turned to around to see what we were talking about.

“What’s up?” she said.

The doctor was still looking at us, I could feel it, and the almost patronizing way he grinned at me made me recoil a bit. I put my hand on the small of Sonya’s back. “I’m going to

take a walk," I said. "Hit the restroom."

I didn't just want to get away from my doctor, who I had already decided to never see again. I also wanted to get some space and maybe a different angle on the show. I walked up to the balcony level. It was cooler up there and mostly empty. I could see the whole ground floor where I stood, the bar and Sonya and Mina and the stage. The woman in the stars and stripes bikini had fallen a half beat behind on the lyrics to "Hot Stuff," but she didn't seem to care. She was completely immersed in her dancing. Even more of her nipple slid out from her top now. When I'd seen it happen before, at other shows, I assumed it was just a common carelessness. I saw now that this dancer knew exactly what she was doing. She played it off as an accident unnoticed in the single-minded flow of performance, but that's not what was going on.

I thought to myself then that I was fortunate to have the cabaret as an education in the aesthetics of the kathoey. I must have unknowingly crossed paths with dozens of them in my first weeks in Thailand. One night while dancing in some cavernous space with my new colleagues, I realized to my acute and amplified shame that the beginning of the erection that stirred in my pants was not for a real woman. Suddenly, the bulbous breasts made no sense on the tall, skinny frame. Like a cubist painting, individual elements became more prominent for being fractured: a cropped red t-shirt; the heavy crescents of bare flesh when she raised her arms; sharp cheeks; bangles; the angular shoulders; straight hips in cutoffs; abs without a trace of body fat and no bra—the last piece alone enough to flag a kathoey for anyone with a clue.

I bent forward over the balcony to see more of the floor below, my forearms leaning on the railing.

Something tickled the inside of my back pocket and I whirled around, ready to protect my wallet.

“Sorry!” A young Thai guy jumped back. He looked surprised and apologetic but more smiling than scared. “I’m not take anything. Just—” He held his elbows close to his body rubbed his knees together. “You are scared? I just wanted to give you my number.”

“Jesus,” I said. I patted my back pocket to make sure my wallet was still there. From my other back pocket I pulled out the piece of paper that he had slipped in, with a name and a number on it. “Yes, you scared me,” I said. “You can’t do that.”

“I am Thanachai’s friend,” he said.

“Thanachai?”

“Your friend a doctor,” he said.

“Christ. I have a girlfriend,” I said, my anger rising. “Look at me! Do you think I want your number?”

“My name is Phet,.”

“I see that,” I said. “You’re lucky I didn’t accidentally break your jaw, Phet. I’m going back to my girlfriend now. See? She’s over there.”

“Your girlfriend?” He moved towards me to look out over the railing. I stepped aside to keep my distance. “Farang lady?”

“That’s her,” I said. “The small one.”

“She likes ladyboys?” His voice had an unnatural warble.

“We like the music,” I said. “You shouldn’t sneak up on a farang. It’s not safe.”

“You think they are beautiful?” He nodded toward the stage.

“I think they are impressive. I don’t know what my girlfriend thinks. You can ask her yourself.”

He laughed nervously and then stopped, as if afraid he’d misunderstood a joke.

"Yes," he said. He drew it out like a half-uncertain question. "Nice to meet you."

I nodded and turned toward the stairs and heard his sing-song "Bye bye… ." Then he shouted, "What's your name?"

I raised my palm to him and kept walking.

When I got back to them, Mina was finishing the last of her drink, looking antsy. Sonya was paying attention to the stage.

"Another beer?" I offered. "I think it's almost time for intermission."

"Not for me. I'm going to meet my friend Kelly at the Londoner. It's the drunken rugby player angle."

"Right. Sounds like potential for roughness."

"Indeed. Feel free to join later if you guys are up for it. We'll be there for a while."

Sonya turned around. "She's so sexy!"

"Mina's taking off."

"You're not into the show?" Sonya asked, unable to hide her disappointment, even in the dark and noisy club.

"Like I said, I prefer my dicks attached to bodies that actually want to use them."

I stepped aside for Sonya to say goodbye. "You're leaving so soon!" Sonya said.

"I have exceeded my camp quota for the day," Mina said. She leaned for a hug from Sonya and repeated her invitation to join them later.

Neither of us were up for the pumping house and flashing lights that followed when the show was over and G.O.D. turned into just another gay club. The taxis waiting on Silom were stubborn and criminal as ever, refusing to a man to use the meter, so we darted across traffic to

flag one in front of Soi Convent. It was cool and quiet inside the car; the driver lowered his music to a whisper and I told him our address in Saphan Khwai. He was friendly, extra hospitable, and repeated our destination as if to emphasize the successful communication we achieved despite our different languages.

Sonya mistook his eagerness for confusion and snapped at him.

"Are you tired?" I asked. "Mad about something?"

"Why is he pretending not to understand us?"

"The Londoner is on the way if you want to catch up with Mina. She said—"

"I know she did. It's like 200 baht for a drink in there."

Traffic opened up after Nana and we flew past the Londoner with all the other taxis on the city's main artery—the old bicolor designs of red & royal blue and yellow & dark green joined now by newer models with electric shades of roof-to-tire pink and other colors.

"What did you say to her, anyway?" she said.

"What did I say about what?"

"I thought we were all going to hang out tonight. And then you left her by herself."

"I left her with you," I said.

"Clearly she wasn't enjoying herself," she said. "You could make an effort."

It went on like that for a while. Then we rode in silence until our taxi driver broke in to confirm our directions as we got closer to our apartment building. At the mouth of our narrow soi the regular yaa dong cart displayed its medicinal alcohols in a row of jars; long chunks of raw beef and innards hung on hooks behind the smudged glass of the Isaan stall, where the woman who tended the charcoal turned over strips of smoking meat in their folded metal grate. By the time we reached our building I was convinced that Sonya was right—that we really had failed at

showing Mina a good time, that we came across as boring or naïve. Sonya said "I got it" when the taxi came to a stop but then took her time digging through her purse as if annoyed with its contents. She handed the fare and a generous tip to the driver, and before we got to the elevator we both received two texts at the same time: "So u decided to hit the S&M club after all? Hope u took the proctologist." And, "Drinks tmrw at Sofitel? Will pick u up."

"What is she talking about?" Sonya asked.

"It's a long story," I said. "Saw my doctor at the show tonight."

"That was your doctor? He was cute."

"You think all gay guys are cute," I said.

"Has he seen you with your pants down?"

"Full check-up." I liked it when she teased me. It meant she wasn't exasperated. I moved closer to her as she opened our door, testing the waters.

"Try to be a little more fun tomorrow," she said, passing while taking off her shoes. "Don't wander off and leave us in the lurch."

"Whatever you say." She went into the bathroom. I lay down in bed in my jeans.

Our tiny studio was just big enough for our bed and a small couch, which sat to my right, by the door. We cooked on a hot plate next to the sink, on a counter to the left. Our plates and bowls were Japanese-style from Chatuchak—I'll always remember that, the greenish-brown glaze, the weird sense of optimism it gave me to see how Sonya went out of her way to buy stylish dinnerware even when we were living on top of each other like that.

"Kevin?" she said, speaking through a toothbrush and a mouthful of lather. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Anything, babe." She spit again and rinsed her brush.

"Can you fold the laundry tomorrow before I get home?"

"At your service," I said, and closed my eyes again. I would need to get up in a moment and take off my clothes and brush my teeth too, but for a few moments I stayed there in silence, letting my senses readjust after the club. I heard the usual ringing in my ears. We wouldn't have sex that night; I knew there was no point in trying. That was ok with me. I felt like I needed to clear my head before sleep, to reorient myself somehow, to get back in touch with the solitude and the dark.

*

The weather that year stubbornly refused to undergo the transformation that usually comes by late November, what the old woman who managed our building called, in Thai, "the cool season being born." In Bangkok you eagerly anticipate the cool season being born if, like we were, you are stingy about running the air conditioning at night and opt instead for open windows, despite the fact that the only thing they let in the apartment is the violent percussion of tuktuks, the sporadic panic of barking soi dogs, or the 3:00 a.m. crow of a rooster from an empty urban lot.

And then you wake up one morning and it feels like something in the atmosphere has taken a comforter by one end and is lifting that end up and down and fanning you with its waves. All at once, a breeze moves through the narrow side sois of the city, little rivers of cool air over concrete, an invisible but palpable flushing out. For maybe three glorious weeks the city feels like a lukewarm bath. If you have the luxury of a car—we didn't, but Mina did, and she was picking us up at 7:00—you can roll down the windows and turn up your music and, when it is late and traffic is moving you want to stick your arms out of the car window and look up at tangled ropes of electric wires and streetlights and, if it is an exceptionally clear night, a few

stars, and thank God you're alive.

On the very day that the cool season was born post-term, Mina invited us out for a drink with her dad. We didn't need a ride—taxis were cheap, we lived just a few minutes' walk from the Skytrain, and it was twenty minutes out of her way in good traffic—but she offered anyway and we said yes as we almost always did when someone offered us a favor because, I suppose, an ugly part of us felt we were owed, as if the career choices we made were a favor to the world.

I spent the day as I often did, at an Internet café, telling myself I was looking for work when I was actually reading the *Bangkok Post* and chatting with Sam, the gregarious Thai guy who had studied law somewhere in Austraila and who ran the place. A motley collection of other neighborhood expats gathered there to call home on Skype or, if they were to be believed, trade stocks, or whatever other projects they invented to create the illusion of structure to their lives. Many of them were older than I, in their forties or fifties, taking extended vacations or early retirement, happy to give themselves over to the same inertia that kept Sonya and I in that studio apartment. In between all of the fake work we often chatted about politics—the overwhelming apathy that allowed Thaksin and his nominees to consolidate their power in the name of populism, to take more and more for himself and his allies so that, by this time, it seemed that in Thailand's Machiavellian public sphere, all but the most stalwart establishment politicians had become a Thaksin ally of convenience. Journalists made feeble noises about press freedom and human rights, but you almost had to admire the way sly old Squareface ignored them or laughed them off in public while drowning them in litigation. I cared about this stuff not only because it provided a distraction from my own life, but because, as a so-called good-governance expert—or, as my underperforming resume put it, an "experienced specialist dedicated to capacity-building of ASEAN-member nation civil sector institutions in a consultancy role"—it was

ostensibly my professional duty to do so. The talk reliably turned to a standard litany of fatalistic observations: what old shophouses real estate companies were tearing down to build condos or a mall, what new Western restaurant was overpriced, which bank had the most arcane service requirements, or which motorcycle taxi rings were emboldened by their mafia managers to charge twice the going rates. Most of these threads contained no small element of truth, but the conversation almost always had an undertone of complaint to it, as if we'd lived in the city our whole lives and it had suddenly been populated with millions of people speaking a strange tongue and fucking it up. I occasionally added my own anecdotes to be polite, but I found these conversations tedious and I tried to stick to my reading or to Sam. The crowd was more eclectic than the usual sexpat crowd of former oil workers and military retirees at other bars and restaurants nearby, but of course there were always the men who talked matter-of-factly about which massage shop in the neighborhood gave the best non-traditional services. I liked to think that I avoided those services out of fidelity and respect for Sonya, but in truth it was probably as much about seeing myself as different to the rest, superior somehow.

I got home almost as late as Sonya that evening. She walked through the door a few minutes earlier than usual, dropped her bag, let out a tired sigh, and stood in what passed for the middle of the room. I froze near the end of the bed as if caught, wearing cargo shorts and a long-sleeve shirt I'd pulled, unironed, out of the basket of clean laundry I hadn't gotten around to folding. Sonya saw the laundry but didn't mention it; she didn't say anything about the dishes in the sink either. After pausing for a moment she said, "I'm taking a shower."

As she passed me at the foot of the bed I put my hand out to touch her waist, to stop her moving past me without acknowledgement. I could tell she was exhausted and annoyed and I wanted to chip away at her mood before we went out.

She stopped in front of me. “What?” she said. I had a defiant smirk on my face—I was holding my ground.

She put a finger inside the front of my shirt and let it hang on a button. “Is that what you’re wearing to the Sofitel?”

“Is that what you’re wearing?” I asked, teasing her. I knew she hated her cheap polyester work skirts, and this one hardly stayed on her thinning hips. It bunched under her belt.

“I told you, I’m taking a shower,” she said. “Nice job with the apartment—hope you didn’t wear yourself out tidying up.”

I folded most of the laundry while she showered, placing it in stacks on the bed. After about fifteen minutes she came out again, wisps of steam circling around her head, with a thick white towel around her body and another wrapped around her hair. Her cheeks and shoulders freshly gleamed with moisturizer, but her face was all business. When she tried to pass me at the foot of the bed to get to her clothes, I faced her and put myself in her way again. She stopped, unamused. “Yes?” she said, her voice stronger after the shower. “Excuse me?”

“Need this?” I asked, holding up a bra I hadn’t finished folding.

“No thanks,” she said. “That’s got a wire that pokes my skin.” She grabbed it out of my hand and tossed it on the pile while she tried to squeeze between me and the bed. I put both my arms around her, but she squirmed to re-fasten her towel.

“Hey,” I said. “I have a system here. Underwear goes over there.” I took her right hand in my left and pointed toward the piles of clothes. She smiled momentarily. I eased her to a sitting position on the bed.

“You’re going to mess them up,” she said.

“You’re going to get them wet,” I said.

"I'm dry."

I kissed her on top of her shoulder and slipped my hand into the wrap of her towel.

"I bet your hair is wet," I said, and kissed closer to her neck. She exhaled audibly, as if frustrated but resigned. She swept over a small pile of t-shirts.

"I just took a shower," she said.

"That's the problem," I said. "All this clean skin." She relaxed a little. "The taste of soap turns me on," I said, and she chuckled. She leaned back on one arm and touched my hair with the other while kissing me lightly on the cheek. Her towel remained stubbornly tied around her chest; I had made no effort to release it. I caressed her calf. We kissed on the lips. She leaned back a bit more, raised her hips to make room in the towel and separated her knees just enough to let me run my hand the length of the inside of her thigh. Her skin there was almost greasy from lotion. Her kiss grew more insistent.

"We're going to be late," she said.

"We'll be okay."

"Mina's picking us up."

"I know," I said, helping her out of her towel, tossing it on a chair. "Guess we'll have to be quick."

"Your specialty," she said, as she cast aside more folded clothes and moved to the top of the bed.

"Ouch," I said, smiling.

I paused below her. Her eyes were closed; she had a hand on her breast, another running up her own hip, caressing herself. I put a hand on the inside of each of her thighs and pressed them firmly back. Despite my familiarity with her body, touching her with my lips always felt

like fresh discovery, a pulse-taking. She was hard to read those evenings when she came home from work; in that exhausted distance between us I could never tell if she wanted more of me or less—if she wanted solitude or someone to fall into. My own uncertainty was an added annoyance to her—I could feel it even if she never said it. But with my mouth on her I felt like I had a direct line to the ebb and flow of whatever currents pulled her out of herself and unfolded her there in front of me.

I am not a great lover. With Sonya I was comfortable, but still while we were having sex I often sensed another version of myself looking down on me from above, a version who in his omniscience was aware of the thoughts in her mind that I could only guess at—the pangs of distraction or dissatisfaction that she kept silent. I often felt that this meta-self, the external observing self, was my real self, while the body doing the fucking was an empty, pedestrian tool, performing its function adequately but never spectacularly. I would try to attend to the moment, to empty my mind, which is why, despite the fear that it marked me as some kind of momma's boy, I always closed my eyes during sex. I was distracted by my awareness—by my awareness of my awareness—the act of attempting to please a woman and, in the parts of myself I admitted to no one, including Sonya, of my conviction that on some level I was failing.

Which may be why I enjoyed going down on her as much as I did. In that situation I had all the patience in the world—in no way did my tongue feel like a piece of machinery. It felt more intimate to me—the woman couldn't conceal herself the way she could during intercourse, when the very words and sounds that were my only clue about what she felt could also be used to create a kind of protective distance between us.

Usually, I her taste herself faintly on my lips. I might let her take my finger in her mouth and bite down on it. On a good day, that was how I knew how hard she came—by how deep an

impression her teeth left in my skin. My self-consciousness made me predictable in those days, unwilling to break from what worked, and something about making her come first helped to quiet the conversation in my head, or above my head, about my own adequacy. We had a choreography in which we were willing to sacrifice an exceptional experience for safe consistency.

As I lay face down on the bed, having kicked off all my clothes, bare ass in the air, I felt a sudden buildup of gas in my gut. It was enough to make me stop what I was doing and go to the bathroom. My polite flushing couldn't have muffled the sound of it, but when I came out Sonya was touching herself, her eyes scrunched up, her mouth pursed in a loose O. She touched herself while I stood there by the side of the bed, the toilet still making its hollow filling sound. She let her head fall in my direction and said, "Kevin, I want to come."

I kneeled next to her on the bed and put my hand over hers. She guided my rhythm. With her other hand she reached for me, but a bit too eagerly, so that I had to pull away for a moment. My body would respond, I was sure, but not until I reestablished my connection to her sexual pulse.

I continued to touch her until she pulled me on top of her, a white crease between her eyebrows. Almost immediately I was distracted by the sound of a group of Thai people singing Christian songs wafting up from some other apartment in the building. They sang them in their own language, but I recognized the Thai word for Jesus: *Yaysue*. They sang praise to Yaysue like they were pleading for something, and in the presence of such earnest fervor I became embarrassed at my own relative lack of passion. As Sonya's sounds grew louder it seemed as if their song did too, until those pious converts—how did they become Christians?—might as well have been crammed into the room with us, holding hands in a U-shape around our bed while I

struggled to maintain a rhythm. Compounding the distraction was the fact that the corner of the bed sheet had come loose from the mattress and I was having trouble with my grip. For a moment when Sonya was making the breathless sounds that told me she was about to come, I felt like I would do the same. But I couldn't get traction with the sheet bunching up. At the very moment when she needed me to put her over the edge I felt like I was slipping toward the foot of the bed.

"Why'd you stop?" she said, as I tried to reposition myself. I reclaimed a precarious hold on the mattress and continued, distracted by my lack of traction but doing my best to hide it. In a few minutes her sounds grew louder again, more urgent, plaintive like the Christians', and again my knee slipped out from under me and my left arm—shaking from exhaustion by the awkward job I'd been asking it to do—nearly collapsed under the weight of my torso. "Jesus," she said, "Why do you keep stopping?"

"Yaysue," I said, and started to laugh, the Thai Christians having moved on to a happy song whose tune I recognized from the acoustic playlists of my junior high youth group in Minnesota. They all sounded so damn eager for something, their idea of Christianity unpolluted by first-hand experience of the institution in America. You could almost hear the same wide-eyed attitude of western tourists who spend hours on Khaosan extolling to strangers at plastic tables in pubs the purity and integrity of Buddhism. It was touching and absurd.

"What's the matter?" Sonya said. The sex had fully stopped. There would not be a return. The pathos in being physically defeated by my own bed, my own apartment, struck me as unbearably funny. I held myself over her but let my head fall to her chest, laughing silently and to myself at first but then more freely, building, together with the Christian hymn's refrain, to an intensity in which tears streamed down my cheeks and mixed with the sweat in the crook

between her shoulder and chest.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" she said, slipping out from underneath me, pushing open the bathroom door and leaving me on the bed, wiping my eyes on my knuckles and on our half-bare mattress.

I remember all of this because of something that happened later that night at the Sofitel, and its repercussions. In retrospect, I can see that I wasn't aware of how anxious sex made me feel then. I wasn't aware of my own self-awareness during sex, if that makes any sense. If it doesn't, it doesn't matter. It will soon enough.

*

Sonya made me change into a pair of white linen pants, which embarrassed me with their transparency. I did it for her. She said she did it for one of the hosts, who made a show of walking behind me and staring at my ass the last time we entered the long foyer of the wine bar and restaurant on the 37th floor.

When she introduced us to her father, I could tell where Mina got her easygoing confidence. His name was Doug but we called him Mr. Candler. He stood to greet us with warm handshakes at a corner table where he was already halfway through a bottle of red. He wore his hair slicked back in a power haircut with some distinguished grey at the sides. Crisp shirt, navy blue suit. Attention-grabbing watch. In his younger years he may have had dimples, but, also like Mina, he wore his age extremely well. He looked like the kind of guy who kept getting more handsome until he died.

Mr. Candler had lived in Bangkok since the 1970s, so he had no shortage of stories to

tell. He and Mina's mother were divorced, but they remained on good terms. Pouring us all some wine, he asked me what I did for a living.

"Consultant," I said. "International development, civil sector, that kind of thing."

"Consultant looking for something to consult about," Sonya said. Mr. Candler laughed.

"Mina must know some people in that line of work," he said, while scanning the menu cursorily. "How about some bites?"

"He's trying," Sonya said.

Mr. Candler handed his daughter the menu. "You remember what's good here. Get some of those shrimp."

Conversation came easily after that; the topic of my unemployment did not come up again. The wine never seemed to run out. I looked over at Sonya's flushed neck and saw that she was getting tipsy. Mina was in her element too; telling bawdy stories about her friends that left little doubt about the nature of her own escapades as well. Mr. Candler didn't seem to mind.

"This is excellent wine," Sonya said.

He refilled her glass. "What about you, Sonya? Are you happy here?"

"Am I happy here? What does happy mean?"

He ran his fingers along his tie. "Happy means you wake up every morning ecstatic to be alive."

"Ecstatic, Dad? Really?" Mina said. She looked at me and rolled her eyes.

"Anything in that ballpark," he said. "So what about it, Sonya?"

"We like it here," I said.

"Happy?" Sonya interrupted. "You're asking me if I'm happy?"

"The street food is amazing, addictive," I said.

"I'm happy *now*," Sonya said. She leaned back in her chair and brought her glass to her lips. She looked to the side a little bit, like she was remembering something. "If that's what you mean."

A manager came to check on our table, and Mr. Candler assured her we had everything we needed. I didn't notice her at first because I was focused on something in Sonya's demeanor that made me uneasy, beyond the intoxication. As the manager turned to go, though, I saw her stop and look at me startled, a double-take. A lurch of recognition hit me too.

"They like to go to the ladyboy shows," Mina said.

Sonya came back from her reverie. "You hated it!"

"Mina can be a stick in the mud," Mr. Candler said. "She has her hang-ups too."

"I didn't hate it," Mina said. "I just didn't like it as much as rugby players."

"Haven't arrived in Thailand until you've had a ladyboy," Mr. Candler said. "That's what my friend Frank says, anyway."

"That's 'cause Frank is flaming," Mina said. "His boat has seen more fudgepacking than the Keebler factory."

I tried to chuckle politely, but I don't think I managed it. After months of knowing Mina, I realized I couldn't gauge her politics. A lot of second-generation expats were surprisingly conservative, for a pack of hedonists. Sonya ran the tip of her finger around her glass.

"We send you to San Francisco for four years, and what good does it do?" Mr. Candler said.

"I learned how to throw an awesome sorority party."

"Mina's missing out," Sonya said. "She'll come around."

"I hope so, for her own sake," Mr. Candler said.

I excused myself to go to the restroom. When I stood up from the table I could see that I was on my way to being drunk as well.

In the men's room I splashed some water on my face and checked my teeth in the mirror. As I stepped into the small lounge between the bathroom and the hallway—a place reserved for men, I assumed—Mina walked through the door.

"Oh my God, you have to help me fix my sandal," she said, grabbing both my hands and moving me toward a velvet settee. She put out her foot and I understood that I was supposed to attend to it. I kneeled down in front of her and took it in my hand. Her sandal wasn't broken, it was just unfastened.

When I fastened the buckle she moved her other leg to the side so I could see her black thong underneath her black dress. She put her other leg on my shoulder and pulled me forward.

"You think you're done?" she laughed. She opened her legs even wider, pretending to pull me closer before swinging her leg off my shoulder and getting up. Straightening herself, she said, "My dad wants to know if you guys want to use our villa on the 25th. We're going to be somewhere else."

I was still on a knee looking up at her. If it had been anyone else in the world other than Mina—and, I suppose, anywhere other than Bangkok—I would have been shocked. Instead, I was only mildly surprised. It seemed within the margin of error of a joke. A logical data point in the evening. I felt more intimidated by the nonchalance of the invitation and the asymmetry of power it represented in our friendship than I did by the view of her inner thigh. Also, I had enjoyed a lot of wine.

When we got back to the table, Mr. Candler was laughing heartily at something Sonya said.

"Wow," I said. "I've had more wine than I thought."

"Doug wants us to use his new villa in Khao Lak," Sonya said. Then, turning to them, "Are you sure you can't come?"

"Not this time," he said, "but you two have fun. We'll plan on it for another time."

When the check came I tried to get out my wallet but Mr. Candler brushed me off. "Unemployed consultants' money is no good here," he said.

"Seriously," Mina said. "He does their legal work. He has a tab—it's not like he really even pays for it."

"I pay for it by doing their legal work," he said to Mina while signing the check.

I looked at Sonya and she shrugged. The bill must have been hundreds of dollars.

"It's been *so* nice to meet you," Sonya said, clutching her purse. "Mina, thank you for introducing us to this lovely man."

"We'll expect to see more of you soon," he said, taking her hand. "We'll be disappointed if we don't."

"You can count on it," Sonya said, and gave him a polite kiss goodbye on the cheek.

On the way home we argued about whether or not to accept the Candlers' generosity.

"I don't like him, and she's practically a bigot," I said. "I don't like the idea of owing him anything. We don't need that."

"We may not need this, but I want it," Sonya said. "*I* need this. If I don't get out of the apartment for a while I don't think I can make it through January. I'm sick of *everything*, Kevin. I know it's a terrible thing to say. Your face, sometimes. That *don't blame me* look you always have—it's more than I can take. I don't care what his politics are—everyone's a libertarian in

Thailand, local and foreign, even if they don't call it that. Name somebody who's not."

"The minister of culture."

"Ok, a libertarian or reactionary. You know what I mean."

I acquiesced—there was no way I couldn't—and things were lighter that night. We continued the sex we started that afternoon. Sonya took almost complete control. Her neck and chest were flushed with patches of plum-red from her warm wine buzz and that cool-season breeze flowed over us like a clear mountain brook. She wasn't going to let anything derail us.

Until she did, briefly. I felt her edging closer to release and then, uncharacteristically, she stopped. She looked me deeply in the eyes—more present than she was just moments before—put both hands on my temples, and said:

"Kevin Connor, tell me you will always bring me back. No matter what, tell me we'll always find each other." I nodded, she kissed me, and I never in my life felt more in love. It was out of character for her to say those things. I knew she wasn't speaking literally, but she seemed to be revealing a genuine and fragile part of her she wanted me to see for myself, acknowledging something about where we were and where she ultimately wanted to end up, together.

Then I wondered if Sonya felt strangely sexualized atmosphere at the Sofitel too. She obviously found Mr. Candler attractive—he was, indisputably, even though he was at least twice her age. I couldn't shake the feeling that the energy and enthusiasm with which Sonya was riding me again, her head thrown back and eyes closed, was part of a residual arousal that had accumulated over the course of the evening. I tried to concentrate instead on her abdomen, the way it flexed and rolled as she worked herself back and forth over my pelvic bone, but once the idea arose that she was imagining something other than what was before us in the room it was remarkable to me that I could think about anything else at all.

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Since the collapse of the baht in 1997, construction in Thailand had gradually returned, so that by 2004, when we arrived, another building boom was well underway in Bangkok and the near-southern coasts. Khao Lak was a perfect example. Most of it was a national park, but that didn't stop the most well-connected developers, and on that forested stretch of land on the Andaman side of the peninsula north of Phuket, several competing luxury resorts had opened their doors that year. To get to the resort, our driver—paid for by Mr. Candler—wound down a steep drive that split off and descended from the main road. There was no village to walk to; we would have no reason to climb that steep hill to the highway. It was, as all resorts aim to be, self-contained.

The villa that Mr. Candler offered to let us use was easily three times the size of our studio in the city, with long glass doors that opened to a patio, an outdoor shower, and the beach. There was a bowl of fruit on a side table when we walked in, little pink blossoms on the impeccably folded and tucked bed sheets, and an espresso machine. I made a cup for us before I even put my suitcase away despite neither of us really wanting it, just because I could.

I drank a few sips for show while Sonya dug through her bag, pulled out her swimsuit, and threw it on the bed. We both had a light mist of perspiration on the brow from our walk to the villa, but the rooms had been pre-cooled, the AC already running, which made all of the surfaces—the polished wood tables and nightstands, the bright white sheets on the bed—gloriously cool and smooth to the touch. Sonya peeled off her shorts together with her panties, pulled her double tank-tops over her head, and let it all lay on the hardwood floor. I stood and smiled at her while blowing on my coffee from across the room. She beamed, practically

hopping with excitement.

"It's so *nice*," she said. The curtains were wide open so that anyone who walked by could have seen her there, arms spread wide, her body bare to the world, the usual dark patch of hair now a mere trace, evidently trimmed in the last 24 hours in anticipation of this trip. She turned toward the bed, but instead of grabbing her bikini she threw herself face-down on the comforter and ran her arms and legs across it in an arc as if making a snow angel on the white fabric. Her skin was naturally dark, but she hadn't seen the sun in six months, so she was almost as pale as the bedding. I could see the muscles working in her thighs, the blackened soles of her feet only accentuating the way the rest of her was so completely free of blemish, so clean and still unscarred.

Eventually she composed herself and turned over on her back, crossing her legs at the ankles and her hands behind her back. I put my coffee down and closed the curtains for privacy, but instead of going to her in that bed and reveling in her childlike excitement I sat down in a chair next to the little side table and picked a mangosteen out of the bowl. Even with the glass doors closed at 50 yards from the water, we could hear the faint sound of waves over the purr of the air conditioner. With her head propped on a pillow, Sonya looked down at me, over her nose and her still-heaving torso. Did I mention it was Christmas? It was. Not the season, but the day. I coaxed, slowly, a segment of mangosteen from its thick purple flesh, and then another, until all that was left was the little bowl of the husk. Then I dug my thumb into a sweet green orange, filling the room with citrus. All the while she looked at me over her naked body, not unpleased. I loved Thai green oranges for the way they peeled so easily; I took my time with the strands of pith. She uncrossed her legs at the ankles, let her feet fall loose, toes out to the side toward the bed. In my line of vision, when I held up the slice of orange as an offering, it obscured the

insides of both of her thighs.

Before sunset we took a walk down to the beach, a wide, long stretch of toasted yellow sand. It wasn't the powdery white stuff you found on islands further south, but there were tall palms and a separate, manicured area with a row of wooden lounge chairs. There were a few young Thai couples, a woman in a big floppy hat to protect herself from the sun, but mostly it was Nordic-looking European families, little boys and girls with hair so white it almost hurt your eyes in the sun. A boy and his sister, aged around six and eight, made periodic sorties toward the low waves, screaming as they ran, the vastness of the lukewarm ocean and the excitement of entering it almost too much for them to bear. The beach is a paradox for parents—they keep a close eye on their children lest they get caught in an undertow, but out of the water, the soft sand makes it one of the safest places in the world. You can run and fall and never get hurt.

We kicked off our flip flops at the edge of the sand and walked straight to the water, standing there in the surf, staring at nothing in particular on the horizon. The sun was low but the sky had not yet blossomed into full color; the clouds looked like crumpled fabric in some places, pulled wisps of raw cotton in others. In a warm, hazy light we stood with water up to our ankles. Sonya held my hand.

"The Similan Islands are out there, I think," I said. "Supposed to be the best diving in Thailand."

"We should do that sometime," she said. "It's cheap here."

We lingered there for a while and she said, "There's a boat out there."

"Squidding, maybe. They do that at night," I said.

"Do you ever imagine what it would look like if they drained the ocean? Or if you could see everything it contained? So much freaky life under there. So *alien*. Most of the world is

covered by squirming swimming things."

"I think that's the impetus behind diving," I said. "To have the power to see all that alien life."

A pink plastic ball dribbled toward us. I picked it out of the surf and threw it back to the blond kids. Facing the shore, you could see what set this location apart from other areas on the western coast: not another settlement in view; beyond the manicured lawn of the resort, the wildness of the forest spread out in both directions, north and south along the shore, growing thickly up the hills from the edge of the beach.

"That looks like a military boat, actually," Sonya said. She was right. Closer now, its boxy grey outline was clearer.

The sea glittered calmly the way it does before sunset. Part of me wanted to put on my trunks and dive all the way in, but I could tell Sonya was content with this for now. She stood in front of me, still staring at the horizon, leaning back against my chest and pulling my arms around her. I asked myself if this was a precarious happiness or if it was our natural condition—if our circumstances in Bangkok, the stress and state of limbo, were to blame for any distance that had grown between us, and if we would soon revert to the way we had been together before all of that crept into our lives. Or if this break from reality was dangerous—if we weren't setting ourselves up for more disappointment in the future, when the calm lullaby of waves was cemented over again by traffic noise and the outlines of bland apartment buildings obstructing our view. I shied away from the thought that our state of mind was not in fact our own to control—that no matter how skilled we became at practicing equanimity in the face of our petty frustrations, we are hard-wired to be influenced by the people to whom we are close. That our minds could never be compartmentalized, never fully our own, because they were always

susceptible to that influence. Maybe that was why we humans needed religion, I thought—to keep the whole network, the whole organism, from breaking down. Maybe happiness was an exclusively collective project.

I bent my cheek to Sonya and softly grazed her ear. When the Nordic kids and their parents headed in and the beach became quieter, she turned her head back and kissed me, a long, slow kiss, slower than the ships on the horizon or the sun swelling orange as it lowered itself into the sea.

We woke the next morning to a thudding slap on the glass door. Sonya sprung upright immediately, but even in my deeper sleep I was aware somehow that it was no human noise. Something splashed on my wrist; I assumed, or half-dreamt, that a pipe had burst somewhere. "Get up," she said, ripping the covers off the two of us, but before we could stand the sliding glass doors shattered violently and more water rushed in and lifted our mattress up off the frame. Other furniture floated too, and for a dream-like moment it seemed that everything would stay suspended like that, remaining in its rightful place: the suitcase twirling a few feet above where I'd left it the day before, the fruit tray hovering above where the side table used to be. We clung to the mattress and shared the wide-eyed gaze of the calmly terrified before it carried us out the space where the door used to be and left us in the eddy of our walled-in patio, so that we were able to grab on to a fixture on the wall. I followed Sonya's movements at every turn; she was able to get a foothold and scale the wall and get to the place where it connected to the roof. She shouted at me to follow and I didn't know how she knew to do these things—some part of my brain was still asking where the leak had come from. From somewhere I heard what I could have sworn was the ear-splitting climax of an opera aria in soprano. "Kevin, grab the wall," she

shouted, and I was ashamed that I wasn't able to lift myself up on the first try. Sonya leaned toward me to help me up, but I knew that she was so light I would simply pull her back in. I managed to swing my right leg over the wall and drag myself up. We made it to the roof. A van floated on its side into another villa. I remember looking down at the scrape on my leg, embarrassed at my lack of athleticism and vaguely worried about infection. I was still looking at that silly, harmless scrape on my own freckled calf when the whole structure shifted beneath us. Sonya grabbed my arm and I heard her scream. Or at least I think I did—even that was obliterated by the roar of water that came at us like a jetliner. Before I could take a breath, the world was black.

I hit what felt like the ground and, panicking, flailed toward what I thought was the surface, only to hit the ground again. Heavy things fell on me in the darkness—I must have opened my eyes, but it didn't matter—bricks, maybe. Parts of a wall. I felt myself being pulled upward in the direction from which those objects came, but it wasn't like moving through water, it was like floating in a viscous black room full of unseen blunt and sharp machines. Everything under the water had the implacable force of a hydraulic arm and the dancing laceration of shattered edges. The briny water I took into my lungs already tasted rotten somehow, and I remember thinking for some reason that this death I was in the midst of traversing was a choice, a wholly conscious decision that, if I had been paying attention, I could have seen coming all along.

But my movement underwater was not a choice. A faint brightness filtered through from one direction where the water looked more brown than black, and I may have kicked toward it, but I don't think I did. I think I was spun around like a leaf in a whirlpool. A tremendous current

hurtled me horizontally until I slammed into something that completely stopped my momentum, a rough post that scraped my face and left my right arm wedged into a sharp, tight space that held me there while unrelenting force of water rushed past me, tugging at my clothes. I had hit a palm tree. Flailing, I grabbed for a branch with my other arm and wrapped my legs around the trunk. Desperate percussive noises escaped my throat as I tried to secure my hold on the palm, hearing the sound of a coast full of splintered matter pulled out to sea beneath me. Out to sea would be the end, I knew.

In my first glimpse of the wreckage, some skeletons of buildings still stood, but mostly it was the palm trees nodding over nothing but a roiling brown sea. It looked as if the ocean had decided to reclaim the world.

I couldn't see the next wave, but I heard it. When it hit I thought my collarbone would snap. The rush pushed me to one side and separated my legs from the trunk. I don't think I would have held on out of strength—my shoulder sockets screamed from bearing all of my weight but I was glad to be tangled beyond my control. Everything pulled me out and away from the tree now, and though the trunk deflected most of it, debris clawed at me from the front and sides. Something caught my shorts and nearly took me with them, but when the water subsided I still clung to my tree, my naked legs once again able to wrap themselves around it. There were more waves but they were much smaller and I hung there quivering, stripped bare and burning from a web of abrasions.

How long I stayed there I do not know. If there were more sounds while I held on, I do not remember them. The water was slow to recede completely, and when it did the ground was a tangle. So perfectly and thoroughly mixed together were the pieces of railings and chairs and snapped lumber piled like matchsticks that it looked from a distance like something curated. I

know how ridiculous that sounds, but it struck me that no team of avant-garde sculptors, given unlimited time and resources, could replicate what lay before me that afternoon. I used my meager footholds to hold on as long as I possibly could, until it became hard to breath from the weight of my body pulling down on my lungs. My throat ached of mud and salt. I vomited gray seawater over my shoulder. It must have been afternoon when I tried to shimmy down, a naked animal descending from a tree, the trunk painful against my testicles. When I fell I did not fall far, and I was lucky to hit an empty patch of sand. I called out for Sonya but there was no living reply, just the occasional percussive crack of settling piles of debris.

I picked my way gingerly to the tallest structure within sight, a small, white cement tower, forty or fifty feet high, with a ladder running up its side. When I crested the top I met a frightened face pushed back against the opposite wall, maybe six feet away, buzzed red hair and freckles, wild eyes, a welt on his forehead and his foot in a pool of blood. Like me, he was mostly naked. I stopped.

"Do you have help?" he asked.

I shook my head to say no. I stayed where I was on the ladder.

"My fucking leg," he said. Seeing me hesitate, he said, "You can come up." I pulled myself slowly over the opening in the low wall.

"You're not English," he said, looking straight at me but appearing at the same time to be seeing something located somewhere else. "My foot is in bits."

"American," I said.

"There's going to be another one," he said, his eyes flitting now. "Aftershocks. You're lucky you found this here."

"How do you know?" I glanced at his injured left foot. From the front it looked fine aside

for some dried blood, but from the side it looked like it had been shot through with an arrow behind the ankle. I sat against an adjacent wall of the square tower with my knees to my chest. Above us were metal supports, some pipes, and a metal platform that cast some shade where we sat. A thin rivulet of blood had reached a drain in the middle of the cement floor.

"I hope this fucking thing holds," he said. "They've got to send a rescue mission before the next wave comes." He did not seem to be in as much pain as you would expect from the look of his wound, but his mouth was twisted up and his eyes bright and almost frantic. He stared at me, but again I did not get the impression that he necessarily *saw* me, not for several minutes. When he did, his face shifted, almost to a smirk.

"We fucking survived," he said. "You're naked too. Happy bloody Boxing Day."

"How do you know there'll be another one?" I said.

"There always is. It's in all the books." He paused, as if calculating my response. "You can take your chances if you want, but I wouldn't recommend it." He gestured his head to what was out there, below us, but he was still sitting down and couldn't see anything past the low wall, other than a strip of blue sky. "Do you have a phone?" he asked, looking back at me and, for the first time, looked right at my genitalia. Instinctively I touched myself to see if I was injured or bleeding; I wasn't.

"We're fucking bare arsed," he said. "Here." He took off what remained of his t-shirt and tossed it to me. I thought about tying it into a makeshift covering for myself, but he needed it more than I did. Besides, I was so coated in grime I felt partly covered.

"Keep it," I said. "You might need it to wipe your bare arse." We shared a kind of a half-smile that felt like mutual relief. "Actually, you should wrap your ankle," I said.

"Bollocks. It's fucked til we get out of here."

After a minute of silence, I asked, “Were you with someone?”

“Yes, I was with someone,” he said, his voice slightly frantic again, as if he was annoyed at my asking a question to which I already knew the answer. After another pause, he said, “He was laying on the bed, watching some program in Thai. Dressed and ready for the beach, impatient little bastard.” He moved his foot and grimaced.

“Let me try to wrap that,” I said.

“We need some fucking help,” he said. But I insisted. I tore what remained of his t-shirt into strips of material. He cursed at the pain when I wrapped it. The fabric immediately soaked through with blood, but I had put some pressure on it at least.

When I finished, I said, “I need to find my girlfriend.” Even as I said it, a part of me felt absurd. Another part of me did not want to acknowledge the absurdity.

“Where is she?” he said.

“I lost her,” I said. “We lost each other. We were staying in the second row of villas.” I stood tenderly and looked over the collage of flattened buildings—splintered wood, overturned vans, bedframes and tables. Plastic buckets and silt-covered branches. “Over there, I think.”

He remained sitting and wasn’t looking at my pointing, but he said, “You can’t get there from here, mate. You need to mind yourself now so you can find her later.”

I attempted a deep breath and called her name as loud as I could with what was left of my voice. My lungs ached; I was lightheaded and nauseous. Still, I tried again. I felt like I was yelling in a muffled compartment.

“Don’t do something stupid trying to be a hero,” he said. “You—bloody hell, we haven’t even said our names.”

I told him mine. His was Ollie. He was peculiar to talk to—manic at times, indignant and

even funny, but every once in a while he would look at me with what felt like an intense rush of gratitude that went beyond the water and the rags. His expression took on the shape of a man in the grip of hallucination, so urgent and immersive was his stare. In certain moments he seemed in a kind of psychedelic awe. I assumed he was simply riding the waves of endorphins and adrenaline his body sent through his veins to help him cope with the pain.

"You go down there and break your leg or get stuck out in that shit when the next wave comes and you'll be doing her no good," he said. I felt confused, more than I did before I climbed the tower. I needed to find Sonya but it seemed, too, that Ollie might have a point about the prudence of hesitation. I started to wonder if he might be right, but I didn't want to believe a half-mad Brit on the edge of delirium, and I no longer trusted myself to recognize the difference between prudence and cowardice.

I stood and looked out at the ravaged land and a rush of despair came over me. No one could have survived out there. It was foolish to imagine otherwise. It was much too late for whatever I could have done. I faced away from Ollie and tried to cry. I wanted to purge tears like a man wanting to make himself puke during a head-spinning drunk. I couldn't, which only amplified my frustration and sorrow. Then I felt something abrasive rising in my chest, and I threw up again, over the side of the wall.

"Good for you," Ollie said. "I wish I could do that too."

When I'd gathered myself, I sat down again. In addition to my cuts, I was badly bruised.

"I should at least get us some more cloth," I said. "How's your head?"

"Edge of the bathroom sink," he said. "And this—" pointing to his heel—"this saved my life."

He explained how he'd been sitting on the toilet when water burst through the door and slammed his head forward into the sink, or the sink into his head, he wasn't sure. He lost consciousness and came to at a searing pain in his foot, out where a balcony had been, the entire face of the hotel block removed, rooms exposed like cubby holes. As the contents of his room swept past him out toward the sea, he remained anchored in place by a piece of rebar that had punctured his leg between his Achilles heel and the bone.

"Speared like a fish," he said. "I'd of been dead if I washed out with all that—" He stopped. "Did you see any bodies down there?"

"I saw people in the water," I said.

"Did you see dead bodies?"

"I did not." I don't know why I lied.

"They're all out to sea," he said. "Or buried in shite."

"You pulled the rebar out of your foot?"

"I pulled my foot off the rebar."

He asked my story, but before I told him, I said, "Your friend was Thai?"

"Yes he was fucking Thai," he said. "We're in Thailand, aren't we?"

I didn't say anything for a while.

"You stay here," I said. "I see some pieces of cloth we can use." I climbed down the ladder, avoiding contact with the rungs where I had cuts in my foot. At ground level some of the piles of debris were head-high. I picked through what I could reach and gathered a few pillowcases and a toddler's dress. It was eerily silent down there. I asked myself again if I shouldn't try to make it across to where our villa was. Sonya would try to head there too, if she was alive. I wasn't even sure of the exact location, though, and attempting to move seemed ill-

advised. And say what you want, but there was also this man up there. I felt an obligation to him, too. A smaller obligation, sure, but a much more present one. As I twisted my body to turn around I almost stepped on a dead cat, bloated and camouflaged in filth. I looked up to check whether or not Ollie had seen, as if he needed to be shielded from a dead animal or the sight of my own precarious footing. Then, as I gazed up the ladder, it struck me that I had been a fool—immediately above us on the metal platform was a tank.

When I got back up to the top I dropped the rags and climbed up a metal support to get a view of the tank. "What was I thinking?" I said, as I craned my neck and looked for a valve. "We're sitting under all this fresh water." Ollie tried to stand but it was too difficult; I told him to rest. Underneath the main line leading from the tank there was a simple faucet like the ones for garden hoses. I twisted it open and let some water smack against the cement. It looked clean. I opened my mouth wide and let it splash over my face. I rubbed my hands through my hair. Then, turning it to a trickle, I cupped my hands and offered them full to Ollie. He used it to wash his own hands. Then he scooted his body beneath the stream of water and drank his fill.

"Heaven," he said when he was done. I opened it farther so that he could wash his wound. When he finished he drank again. "Heaven. Pure heaven."

However reasonable my hesitation to go searching for Sonya was that day, however real my initial shock, I see now that this was the juncture when I could have—with luck, yes, but also courage and persistence—made our lives turn out differently. It wasn't the trauma of the tsunami that caused a lasting fissure between us, though we both have the physical scars to remind us. It was what I didn't do—the slipperiness of time outmatching my grasp, my—I will admit it now—preternatural intuition that the rawness of that man in the tower flirting with losing his mind would draw out a rawness in myself that I needed to expunge. You can call it curiosity or

cowardice; even after these years I don't have any words that are better. I just know that, while I wasn't trying to hurt Sonya or myself or anyone else with my failure to act on her behalf, there was no alternate version of events in which I wasn't going to shelter my demons and shiver away the night, safe on top of that tower.

After we re-wrapped Ollie's leg and covered ourselves in what looked like tattered diapers, we talked until dusk. I told him more about Sonya, our difficulties finding good work at the same time. About the Candlers.

"They'll be here looking for you soon enough," he said. I realized he might be right.

As we both relaxed, our conversation, our whole demeanor, took on a quality of heightened sincerity. Where before his eyes looked frantic, they seemed now to communicate an open authenticity. As night began to fall we kept talking as if this had always been the plan—that, by morning, solutions would reveal themselves. I wondered if he would be able to climb down and walk by daybreak.

"My boyfriend," he said, apropos of nothing. "You asked about 'my friend' earlier. Thien, my partner. Or whatever you call it in America." He told me they'd met ten years ago, on New Year's Eve. "Never thought it would last so long at the time," he said. "You think you found a fuck buddy and the next thing you know, he's helping you put hemorrhoid medication in your arsehole."

I stood to retie my diaper by the light of the full moon. He leaned his head back against the wall and looked up. In the strip of night above us the stars spread out in cosmic scale, and though the moon kept them from their fullest brightness, it also allowed us to see each other's faces as we spoke.

"You shouldn't sleep with a concussion," I said.

"There's no worry of that." After a pause, he said, "He's not one of those ultra-poofy types. Not your typical Thai super-nancy. He's just, eh, normal. Like an American gay."

I nodded politely. It wasn't the time to question definitions.

Then he asked, "What's the worst thing you've ever done? To your wife, I mean. What is the absolute worst thing?"

"My girlfriend."

"Right."

"I'd have to think about it," I said.

"That's all right then, you think about it. In the meantime, I'll tell you what the worst thing I've done is. I can't get it out of my fucking mind." The temperature had dropped since it had gotten dark. I realized both of us had our arms crossed over our shivering chests.

"And I'll tell you the worst part of it, now—the worst part is that it happened just yesterday. If I could fucking take just one day back . . . Christ."

I waited for him to continue. He said, "Do you have yours yet then, or would you like me to go on?"

"Please," I said.

"It was yesterday—or the day before—I can't fucking keep them straight anymore. I told you I was on the lou when the water came in. I was. Dressed. I wasn't taking a shite; I had my head in my hands trying to reckon how I could go back out there and look him in the eye again. And he—he wasn't ready for the beach. What I said earlier wasn't true. He was in his robe and he wasn't going anywhere that day, because when we woke up we saw that the bruise on his face was worse than either of us expected. We'd fought the night before—we were about to have a shag and we fought over some stupid fucking thing. He called me an ugly farang. I hate that

word the way they use it sometimes. It makes me go spare. I hit him with the side of my hand. Just the side, here, like this, but for the love of Christ you should have seen the swelling. When I saw it in the light the next morning I thought I might have to take him to the hospital."

"Maybe it looked worse than it—"

"It was fucking horrible," he said, a slight cracking in his voice. "He planned the whole vacation—I didn't lift a bloody finger. I wish he would have hit me back. I would have let him do it."

I knew there was nothing I could say to make him feel better, so when he was done, I said, "I cheated on Sonya once."

"Once? Join the fucking club mate. You cheated on her and that's the worst thing you can think of?"

"Aside from today, you mean?"

"What's that?"

There was no use saying it out loud, but there could not have been a clearer sign that I had just completed the worst thing I would do—or not do, in this case—than the fact that, while Ollie told his story and it had gone thoroughly dark, I felt a measure of soothing relief from the subterranean guilt that had buzzed through me the entire day. No matter what happened tomorrow, I had chosen to spend the first twenty-four hours of our crisis in that water tower while Sonya was out there somewhere, possibly needing my help. I had rationalized my cowardice to the point where even I was not aware of it until it was too late. Ollie wanted me there and in some twisted logic in my head I convinced myself that by talking about Sonya—by coming clean up there as a kind of a confession—I was honoring what I owed her.

"She was at home," I said. "It had gotten to the point where we were so tired of being in

each other's space that we couldn't even come near each other. She would just shut down on me sometimes. I'd get irrationally jealous, off-balance, but instead of talking about it I just acted like I didn't give a fuck if either of us came or went. If she talked like she wanted to stay in Bangkok, I said that I was over it and ready to head back. Like I might actually just move on. Which was a joke, of course; I could never do that. If she talked about looking for jobs in another country, I started talking about moving to a bigger apartment here, saying 'I' would do it, instead of 'we.'"

Ollie listened patiently.

"So one Friday she comes home in one of her moods and announces that she's staying in to watch movies on her laptop and go to sleep early—doesn't ask me if that's ok, doesn't even invite me to share the same—never mind. She was tired. It was fair. I was the asshole. But the implication was always that I'm not tired because I didn't have to walk around a freezing office in an ugly skirt all day."

I could hear the resentment in my voice and it took me by surprise. Ollie and I had been talking in that small square space for so long into the night that it had ceased to feel like real life—the surreal landscape outside a kind of thought experiment that wouldn't exist when the sun came up.

"Fuck, what am I saying. I love her. I don't need to tell you that. It was hard. I met a couple buddies at some place on Ratchada I think. I don't remember the name. It had a big deck that wrapped around it and Johnny Walker was doing a promotion. They had some famous DJ there inside the place where the dance floor was. Giant white cubes that some people were dancing on to see the DJ or just to show off. I got separated from my friends and I saw this woman dancing alone on top of one of those boxes—she was wearing short shorts and a tight camouflage shirt, big sunglasses, and you could tell she didn't give a fuck about anybody in

there, what they thought about her. She was curvy and gorgeous and she saw me looking at her, so I walked right up to her. There are times when your body just does things without being told. You know what I mean?"

"I do."

"Most of the time I would have pretended like I didn't see her seeing me, or I would have waited to say hi when the place was clearing out. But I smiled at her and walked right up to her, and I knew by the time I reached her that it would be easy. She smiled at me. The music was so loud I didn't waste any time. She took off her sunglasses and bent down from her perch so her hair was hanging in my face and tickling my neck, and I only spoke one sentence."

"Tell us then," Ollie said. "What was it?"

"'How do I call you?' That's all it took. We pulled out our phones at the same time and I barely even had to say the words. She didn't give me her number but she took mine instead, and that was it. I walked away and she kept dancing, but with a smirk still on her face."

"That's your awful indiscretion?"

"Later on, my friends and I had gone to another place, and I got a text asking me if I was still having fun. I told her it would be more fun if she was there, some standard line like that, and she wrote, 'you can come over if you want.' Her name was Belle."

"Thai girl?"

"Yes. She was incredible."

"And you replied?"

"'What's your address.'"

"I can't say I blame you." This comment pissed me off, though I had no right to feel that way.

"I'm not proud of this, Ollie. I'm telling you because you asked. Actually, never mind. This is fucked up."

Ollie adjusted his leg in a way that reminded me he was in pain. "It's just us tonight, mate, and it will be a long one. Are you Catholic? Consider this your absolution. I told you my sins and you listened and I'm grateful. Please finish." I was grateful too, in my way, and I was relieved to see him coming more solidly into a greater state of ease through his concentration on my story.

"I got in a taxi and told the driver the address. Some luxury high rise on Narathiwat or Sathorn. I couldn't find it again on my own if I tried. I lost the address when I deleted those messages.

"It might have been the nicest apartment building I'd seen on the inside; I remember the disorienting realization that there was a whole world, a whole way of living in the city that I hadn't had access to—that I didn't even know existed. But I was still a white guy, so the guard snapped to attention and let me in, but not before asking, like it was a formality, whom I was there to see. When I told him he looked impressed.

"None of this struck me as odd, not on a conscious level, in the ride up in the shiny elevator to some double-digit floor, or in the walk down the wide hallway, softly lit, where, even though it was utterly silent and every door was closed—it was sometime after two a.m., maybe closer to three—you could sense the money behind those walls. It was weird; I was used to being able to hear noise in our building no matter what time I came home. Street noise from inside our studio. That was probably the most luxurious thing about that place—the complete silence.

Ollie nodded under the light of the moon. For a moment, imagining that earlier silence only amplified the sound of the unceasing crush of the waves on the shore.

"This is where you may get skeptical, Ollie, but I tell you it is true as sure as I tell you anything. I rang the doorbell, waited a moment, and in the very instant that she put her hand on the doorknob to turn it, in the first breath that the door took as it opened, I knew. Before I could see her standing there in front of me I put it together. But I'm telling you honestly, I didn't know before I got there."

"Knew what, mate? Working girl? Prossie?"

"She stood there in front of me in a satin robe. Not as tall without her shoes on. She had these big round eyes, a nice curve to her nose. A lovely mouth. And breasts—that was the thing I should have noticed in the club. But standing there in that different light, the lines of her body still soft but not quite as soft as I'd remembered, it hit me like a flash—"

"Oh."

"Oh, is right. I must have smiled at her, controlled my expression, but she knew that I knew. Before I could say anything she simply invited me in. It was late, and her place looked comfortable and attractive over her shoulder. Even from the door you could see the lights of the city filling up the whole window. When she closed the door behind me, I must have still been smiling like the good-humored victim of a prank. Did I ask her, or did she simply know that I knew? I don't remember. Regardless, she came back around and stood in front of me and, in answer to the question that I did or did not speak, she let her robe slide open across her body to reveal beautiful black and pink lingerie. Honestly, she was curvy and soft and gorgeous. I cringe when I think of what she said to me, but at the time it seemed attractive and bold. She said, 'I am what I am.' And when I finally heard her voice clearly, it was obvious that she used to be a man."

"Right. And what did you do? You didn't run screaming down the hall."

"No, I didn't. She got me a glass of water at some point—she was very graceful—she knew how to move through space—and she must have asked me point blank if I wanted her. I remember the feeling of jumping off a cliff, or its opposite—falling up into the air somehow, straight up from the city, dozens of stories high into an open window. Into that apartment, where no one on earth knew who I was. I had butterflies in my stomach, and to whatever she asked me, I said yes."

"As you do."

"There was a long wait while she went into her master bathroom to get ready. I stood around in her living room looking at her setup—her stereo system alone was worth more than anything I owned. She had good taste, too. Clean lines. Onyx surfaces and beige fabrics. Neutral—I guess you could call them masculine—colors. She spent a conspicuously long time in the bathroom."

"She was preparing herself for you," Ollie said. "Buckets of lube."

"I knew she was, but I'd never been with a kathoey before, not even close, nothing ever remotely like it. I'd just never had the slightest desire. I could recognize them on the street or whatever. But she was exceptional. Exceptional enough to get me to her doorstep, at least."

"And then your id did the rest."

"Something. I don't know if what I had that night was desire, either. It didn't feel like me, but it was better than—it felt like somebody else was getting away with something. The weird thing is that there are moments I remember in hyper-detail, and then other things, things you'd think I'd remember, that are a blank. Like, I don't remember where I first touched her body. Was it standing in front of the door, when she undid her robe? Did I wait until she came out of the bathroom and I met her in her bedroom? How did it actually start? I don't remember

that. I remember I wanted to cry out for joy when she was sucking my cock, not just because of how it felt but because of how much sense it made that she would know exactly how to touch me in a way that, to be honest, no other women ever had. I love women—I love Sonya—and there's something extremely sexy about the occasional physical missteps she makes, the clumsy moments that remind you that this is another human being who is doing her best to connect with your body despite the fact that, for her, much of it is guesswork. She doesn't really know what it feels like for me. She is limited by her imagination. Whereas Belle—once she started touching me, I was not the least bit uncomfortable. I was scared shitless, sure—but I did not have to fake the pleasure.

"Fear is a waste of time," Ollie said.

"Easier said than done." We were quiet for a while, until I said, "And long before the physical pleasure, there was something else. This is going to sound sentimental and maybe kind of—what's your word? Poofy?—it might sound that way, but the thing that got me in the club, and standing on the threshold of her door, and in those first uncertain moments in her apartment, was the eye contact. In retrospect, that's another thing that should have tipped me off. But it wasn't aggressive eye contact like so many of the ladyboys you see on the street, where they stare at you until you glance at them—because they know it's hard *not* to—and they wait and when they see you glancing at them they act like they caught you red-handed. And everyone has to get by I guess but it pisses me off, how anyone can be that intrusive, just with their eyes."

"I feel the same about the girls in Nana."

"So do I! But from the ladyboys—you've seen it—it's another level of aggression. Arrogance, almost. Belle's wasn't that kind of eye contact at all. She was comfortable and confident and genuine. Authentic, I suppose. She communicated integrity, like she could give me

integrity too."

"Jesus, mate. How many times did you see this girl?"

"Once. That's it. Does it sound like I was in love with her or something? No, that's—Jesus, it would be impossible. Trust me. I'm amazed that I remember her name."

"Did she fuck you in the ass?" He laughed a little, which made me all right with the question, in that my story was apparently good medicine.

"That's funny. No. I guess I was pretty terrified, because I had no idea what to do. She must have undressed me—I remember her taking my belt off. She had this huge window next to her bed with no curtain on it, and I realized that you didn't need a curtain when you were that high up.

"At some point she lay back and put her legs in the air. She was wearing a kind of underwear I'd never seen before. Her ass was there, her legs—I had my hands on them and they were impeccably smooth to the touch—but her package remained tucked under some piece of her lingerie, so that when I kneeled over her on her back like that I could see a small bulge but no actual parts."

"What's the point of that? Bring me all this way and I'm beginning to feel disappointed."

"There must be a point, because someone invented those special panties for a purpose."

"So you fucked her in the ass."

"Her nipples were these knots of flesh in my palms. I had my hands on her legs and her stomach and her tits swayed while I fucked her in the ass, yes."

"Congratulations."

"Fuck you, Ollie, this isn't a joke." I tried to say it with good humor, mostly.

"I know it's not. I remember my first real shag and it almost brings me to tears."

I waited for a few moments, shifted myself into a different position. Regardless, it did feel good to tell this story to someone. I didn't know whether I wanted him to take it more seriously, or if I appreciated his cynical levity, but Ollie seemed as right an audience as anyone I'd ever meet.

"Here's the thing about it, the whole reason I'm telling you," I said. "Yes, it was one anonymous night, and yes, Sonya would never—will never know." I stopped then, as a breeze of guilt blew through me—not about the infidelity, but about remaining safe in this tower while she was still out there somewhere, her condition unknown to me. For the first time, I had an inkling of how my decision to stay put in that tower would look in the light of the next day.

"Yes?" Ollie said, bringing me back.

"Well, I suppose there are two things. The first is the feeling of it—of fucking a man. Because even as my body responded to her curves and her lips and her hair and everything that alerted my hormones to start preparing to inseminate, another part of my body was responding to something specific about the fact that she was a man. It's not that I convinced myself she was a woman, or that I'm gay. But while I was fucking her I experienced the most sublime revelation—that's the only way I can describe it—about what it means to enjoy sex in a way that is so intensely unburdened. The very best sex is sex with love. I have that with Sonya. But I realized, right in the middle of fucking Belle, that I had stepped into a gravity-free zone where the expectation to perform, to be a man and successfully coax the vagina to orgasm—all of that floated away into thin air. There was no pressure to act out my role, and it was one of the most liberating experiences I've ever had. As much as I love Sonya and want us to be happy together, it may have also been fatal to our relationship."

"Bollocks. Why?" He shifted his weight and winced. "Why can't you just chalk it up to a

bit of a piss and move on? Why not use it to have better sex with Sonya?"

"Because it feels like every encounter with her implies the possibility of failure. She won't—she shouldn't have to be as selfless as Belle. She shouldn't have to, for Christ's sake. She's not built that way."

"You have an unhealthy relationship to the vagina, mate. I do not mean to make light of it—I consider myself lucky to find them slightly off-putting. I've shagged the occasional female myself, when I was younger. Expectations were not my problem."

"Well I feel sick about it. I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, but I have to start looking for Sonya as soon as the sun comes up. How are you feeling?"

"Bloody excellent. I don't think you'll have to wait long for your sunrise."

I looked at the sky for a hint of navy blue. It would be a while.

"Thank you Ollie," I said.

"Fucking hell, don't thank me. And don't thank me *yet*."

"Authenticity is important," I said.

"Until it isn't," he said. "Should we try to sleep?"

"Tomorrow, I want to help you find Thien."

"That is generous," he said. "And optimistic."

"I mean it when I say thank you," I said.

"Our whole life is one long purging," he said. His voice trailed off in drowsiness.

I closed my eyes too. I thought I knew what he meant, but I never had a chance to ask him.

*

It took me three days to find Sonya in a hospital in Phuket, and when I did, she was in bad shape. The relief at finding each other was tremendous. At Mr. Candler's insistence, we flew her to BNH hospital in Bangkok for treatment. She needed to be admitted for at least a week, maybe more. I made outpatient appointments with doctors, but my recovery would be quicker than hers. Mr. Candler insisted that I stay at the Sofitel during Sonya's convalescence to cut down on the long trip from our studio in Saphan Kwai. I would need to see doctors during the day but would be able to treat my wounds myself while relaxing in my hotel room during the hours when I wasn't with Sonya in the hospital. Mr. Candler could not have been more generous or kind.

On the day I checked into the hotel, Mina was there to make sure everything was in place.

"Order room service if you get hungry," she said. "Don't try to walk all over the place for food." I thanked her and repeated that Mr. Candler's generosity was unnecessary but appreciated.

"I've taken a key," she said, "in case you need anything. Don't worry, she's going to be fine. You both are." I fingered a bandage on my forearm where I received stitches for a deep gash.

"Thanks again," I said.

Some nights I would wake in cold sweats from violent dreams. I dreamt, too, that Sonya was fucking another woman. Sometimes it was a friend from Minneapolis; other times it was Mina. In the mornings it looked like someone had dumped a bucket of water on me where I lay.

Things went on like that for a while. Mina did not come by after that first day, though she occasionally called to reassure me that there was no need to worry about how long we used the room. On doctor's orders I avoided not only going outside when I didn't have to so as not to risk

infection while my deeper cuts were still healing, but also the restaurants in the hotel, including the wine bar. I wasn't ready for public consumption. I watched a lot of movies. After a few days I came to have a sense of the wait staff's schedule, so I could predict who would deliver my food.

One evening, the cart was delivered by a face I didn't recognize among the room service staff, but one that I absolutely recognized from the past. She looked different in her manager's uniform, meeker, I suppose, but her face was unmistakable. I let her into my room. It was Belle.

"They told me about a farang who was caught in the Tsunami." She kept her usual graceful composure. Only the small vibration of the ice tongs she held her right hand revealed any nervousness.

"I can't be the only person who fits that description."

"Your girlfriend, I heard, is in the hospital?"

"You're well informed."

"At night we have nothing else to do but talk." She stood behind her serving cart. I wanted to offer her a chair.

"She will survive?" she said.

"There's no worry like that," I said. "She had some small surgeries."

We were quiet long enough for the TV to seem loud to me. I turned it down almost to silent but left the picture on for light. A bathroom light was the only other thing illuminating the room.

"I saw you in the restaurant that night," I said.

"You were busy with Mr. Candler."

"How do you know him?" I said.

“We know all of the big customers here. Knowing them is my most important job.”

I sat up in bed. I wasn’t sure if it was rude to be partially under covers while speaking to a visitor—if I should stand up to continue our conversation.

“So you knew I was here,” she said.

“It’s a big hotel.”

I got up, finally, and stood before her. I felt disheveled in my drawstring shorts. She came around the cart and sat on the bed. The placket of her firmly starched shirt curved outward like the limb of an archer’s bow. It looked like it could fold open like a shell. She reached out and grazed her hand above my knee.

“You don’t want me?” she said, in an unsteady voice.

I no longer cared about humiliation, or so I thought.

Being fucked in the ass involves at least five different kinds of pain. There’s the initial puncture, the ring of broken glass. The tug up your spine like a hook in your bowels. Others, more than any one person can name. You cannot control the sounds that come out of you; that’s also part of what makes it so otherworldly. You surrender to the body, let yourself become an animal. When the real fucking begins, the long thrusts, when your walls relax, all you want is more animal. You want to be more and you want to be filled more. There is no comparable release.

My face was buried on the pillow. I put a hand on the padded headboard for stability because my head hit it with every one of Belle’s strokes. I could feel her like low current through my spine. A pink stain of blood grew on the sheets where my bandage touched them—it felt like my wound had torn open, but I had no desire to stop. My head was turned to the left and away from door. The sudden plane of light hit the wall before I heard the heavy latch click shut.

"Oh my God. Jesus." I turned to see Mina drop her bag and raise her hand to her mouth. Belle stopped but stayed on her knees behind me, pelvis against my ass in the air. Mina stood stationary in front of a mirror. She did not turn away. On my elbows and knees I saw two of her, upside down, staring at Belle, hand frozen to her mouth as if she was trying to prevent any more words from coming out. "Oh my God," she said. "Fuck." She reached down quickly to pick up her bag and leave.

I threw the pillow over my head and let my shoulders collapse, but I remained on my knees. Belle got off the bed and covered me gently with a blanket. Methodically, she put on her uniform. "Do you need anything?" she asked when she was dressed.

I couldn't look at her then, so I do not know if there was sadness or pity or bemusement on her face. In her voice I heard a note of resignation, as if the experience I had just endured was a common part of life, a universal milestone. It reminded me of the tone of voice that parents used when they dropped their five-year-olds off to the first day of school—as if she hated to see me in pain, but she was aware in a way I wasn't yet that the pain is inevitable.

Much later, when I'd had some distance from that night, I met her for coffee. I felt bad at how I reacted, how little I spoke to her afterward. I also had questions. How did she pay for such a nice apartment on a restaurant manager's job, I wanted to know, even a restaurant as upscale as the wine bar? I had assumed she worked for a bank or a big company. She told me that she had always worked for Sofitel, for almost 12 years, but no, with that job she could not afford payments on her condo. "I bought it in cash," she said. "Actually, Mr. Candler bought it for me." Mr. Candler had his own room in the Sofitel, and he had known Belle for a long time.

I don't owe you an answer to the question that I know is on your mind, but I'll give it to

you anyway. I haven't slept with another *kathoey* since that night with Belle in the Sofitel.

Out in the world again with Sonya after her recovery, everything reminded us that our experience was not special—the whole country felt as if it had lived through what we did. We survived, after all. Our organ bruises and infected wounds were hardly visible.

Gradually, whatever gap that had opened up between Sonya and me only widened. I came to understand the distance between us as something more specific than the emotional burden of tasting death. We both agreed that the hardest part was not knowing—being away from each other and not being able to contact the other, being unsure of whether the other person was alive or dead or dying a slow death under a pile of debris in a swamp. Undeniably, that was hard. But the more fundamental gulf between us, I came to believe, was the difference in our experiences. I have told you mine—I was hurtled straight down, hit the ground, came back up over the wall somehow and ended up clinging to a tree. Terrifying; I will concede that. And yes, there were moments when I saw the clear possibility of death. But the initial time underwater was not as harrowing as one might expect—I must have instinctively taken a deep breath before being taken by the black water. Sonya took much longer to tell me her story, and it came out in parts. Though we avoided recounting specifics to each other in those early days of our reunion, from what I pieced together she was knocked backwards toward the road, and found herself swept up in an immense tangle of debris that was stuck against a row of wires. Because the debris could not move horizontally it was pushed down, and Sonya felt herself being pushed down with it. In addition—the worst part—she is sure that she felt hands of other victims underwater, grabbing on to her legs in an effort to pull themselves up as she attempted to kick herself free. Just when the churning mass of debris was too much she resigned herself to death, the electricity wires snapped, the debris jam broke, and she ended up naked and battered by the

side of the highway, where a local man came by in his truck and took her to the nearest hospital.

Each of us creates our own narratives to explain why our most important relationships sometimes fail us—or how we fail each other. They narratives help us move on. But it's also hard not to acknowledge how flawed those narratives can be, how convenient and how false. What was wrong between Sonya and I was present long before we woke up in that villa in Khao Lak on Boxing Day (as I will forever call it in honor of Ollie, surely the strangest bedfellow—or towerfellow—I will ever have). What was wrong between us was wrong before she washed up on a highway with no clothes on, a cut on her foot that rendered her heel a flap. It would be easier for me if I had a neat story to explain it—our financial situation, my laziness, my insecurities, her lack of patience. There would be some truth to any one of those narratives, and I could even weave more than one of them together, but I refuse to settle any one story because, I suppose, a part of me doesn't *want* to move on. It has been nearly ten years since we lived in that studio, nearly as long since we broke up. And still, I am happy not to put that stage of my life to rest. I'm happy to let it tail me around like the ghosts that so many Thais believed haunted those beaches in Khao Lak years after the tsunami. When it came time to build new resorts, they brought in monks to bless the land and banish the evil spirits, to give the ghosts other homes. I still see Belle from time to time; we have lunch or breakfast on a weekday near the hotel. She is always so well put together that I'm proud to walk into any restaurant with her. She lends me class. She has a steady boyfriend now who treats her well and enjoys her body without, from what I can tell from her description, any sense of shame. If she still feels attraction to me she hides it well.

I find her attractive in a residual way, but I would never pursue it, and she is nothing like an obsession for me. If I am obsessed, it is still with Sonya—our failure to understand each other

despite our intense desire to be close to one another. How could we have failed at something so simple? It required nothing more of us than what we had—not money, but time. No, I plan to let the past be opaque for some time longer, to keep the grooves of memory worn shallow and rough so that we must be always vigilant for the possibility that the train might slip its tracks.

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We saw almost nothing of Mina after that day she walked in on me and Belle. I understood why, but Sonya did not, and without those facts her mind turned to what she considered to be the only reasonable explanation, which was that it was my fault, that I had annoyed or offended Mina in some way. She didn't know how right she was—mercifully, Mina never told her. Mr. Candler picked up every last baht of our hospital bills and the charge for the room at the Sofitel, which was considerable if he actually did have to pay for it.

Despite our persistent efforts to schedule a time to see him in person so that we could thank him properly for his generosity, it was months before we got together. He suggested the wine bar again. I argued against it as firmly as possible over email without appearing bent out of shape. We wanted to take him somewhere else, I argued, the obvious subtext being that we knew he'd put the bill on his account as usual and we wouldn't be able to treat him on our own dime to say thanks. He insisted; I relented. Mina emailed to say she was busy, which puzzled Sonya and made her upset, but I argued that she shouldn't take it personally. It was probably a busy of time of the year for her business, I said. It would give us more time to talk to Mr. Candler. I secretly prayed that Belle would not be there. It had been over five months since the first time I saw her there—I hoped she had moved on.

There was no sign of Belle when we arrived. My relief must have palpable. And yet I also felt a tinge of disappointment that I did not expect. Sonya must have noticed it, because, as we walked through the black and white entryway lined with displays of expensive vintages for purchase, she patted me on the ass and said, "What's wrong? Sad that no one's paying attention this time?"

Mr. Candler hopped up from his seat looking especially glad to see us. He shook my hand and gave Sonya a hug, lingering and tender in a way that I could tell she found surprising and touching. He radiated a competent, strong, fatherly affection. His hair was slicked back as usual, he still wore his jacket, and his collar was sharply creased with the tie loosened just slightly and top button undone. He loosened it a bit more as we settled in to say hello.

"You guys have had some adventures since we saw each other last, to say the least," he said.

Sonya launched into a monologue of copious thanks while Candler sat back and smiled with his eyes. He could have stopped her out of humility but he didn't—he seemed to enjoy letting her go on, as if he was doing her a favor. He seemed to understand that there was something cathartic for her in prostrating herself before him. Her eyes welled up as she described how kind the nurses were in the hospital, how comfortable the room was, how incredible it was to not have to worry about how she would cover the cost of her care. Several times she appeared on the verge of full-on crying, but Candler never looked embarrassed, never made a motion to stop her. He was happy to lean back and receive her gratitude.

He ordered some appetizers from a waitress I'd never seen before and another bottle of the wine he'd remembered we liked. After an hour or so Sonya was tipsy. She excused herself to go the ladies' room. She was gone for less than a minute when Candler sat up straighter in his

chair and said, “Look who it is!”

I turned to see a woman who resembled Belle in every way except her demeanor. The person who carried our tray of food and bottle of wine to us had shorter, duller hair; she had none of the graceful posture of the Belle I knew, and instead of her characteristic eye contact she cast her gaze at our feet while setting the items on our table.

“You remember Belle?” Candler said. “From last time you were here?”

She glanced at me then, a forced smile, and began to open our bottle. She poured a splash in Candler’s glass for him to taste. “Let Kevin taste it,” he said. “He is a gentleman with impeccable taste.” She hesitated, appearing to wonder if she was to take his glass and set it in front of me, before pouring me my own taste.

“It’s fine,” I said, staring at my glass.

“If it was off somehow, Kevin would know,” Candler said. “Nothing sadder than a fine vintage gone rotten.”

Belle stood there dumbly, unsure of whether she was supposed to stay or go. She held her hands clasped in front of her body. The skin on her knuckles was dry and protrusive. Her fingers shook.

“Is there anything else you’d like from Belle tonight? She’s happy to take care of you, but she’s awfully busy.” I could still hear the smirk in his voice. I shook my head, and he nodded for her to leave.

My shame had overcome me and I found it impossible to look him in the eye. With a quick flick of his wrist he lit a match and it startled me so that I almost spilled my wine. He lowered it to light a candle that had gone out. I glanced over my shoulder to see Sonya emerging from the restroom. Candler leaned forward over his plate and the newly-lit candle and stared at

me until he locked me in his stare. “Sonya looks lovely tonight,” he said. “Better than ever.”

When she returned to the table he stood up to pull out her chair, which she graciously accepted. After she scooted back in he put his hands on her shoulders and let them linger there, finishing with two light pats on her upper arm.

“It’s fantastic to see you again,” he said, ostensibly to both of us but delivered in a way that made it sound like I was now the server standing awkwardly and invisibly at the table, wondering if my presence was no longer required.

I loved Sonya then and I believe she loved me back. No story of mine can explain why we came apart despite that love—I don’t fully understand it myself. But here’s what I have come to believe: all of us have in our lives at least one stretch of time when, against our better nature, we turn our backs on what we have. Through passivity or obstinacy or outright aggression or regret—but always by necessity, always out of some need—we tear it down. The painful part is that we are never fully aware of these episodes while we are in them—what feels real at the time is the affection that will later go sour, or the hope that eventually grants us sweet empathy with the fool.

I left Bangkok before Songkran and moved into my parents’ house in St. Paul for the duration of the sweltering Minnesota summer. They put a spare air conditioner in the guest room. I didn’t complain when it failed to blow anything but warm dust. I opened the windows for what little breeze there was, and for the cicadas that sounded so much more melodious than the metallic shearing of the ones in Khao Lak. And every time I passed my parents’ doorstep that summer I imagined—for the life of me, I don’t know why—a baby wrapped in a basket, and it never felt out of place.

When I mowed their lawn I marveled at the unused space between the houses, the almost eerie silence of the neighborhood at midday, the complete lack of activity on the street. You had the feeling along those wide, flat, empty boulevards that the Great Lakes could all get swept up in one westward storm and the Mississippi break its banks and still the city would remain safe and unchanged. In those hottest months, edging that mower along the lines of the sidewalk or circling the silver maple where samaras fell on our front porch, it seemed that nothing unexpected could ever cross my path there, nothing impinge on the task of keeping things straight and cropped and orderly until autumn took the pressure out of the air, a new season being born, and winter settled in like a bitter old dog.

Vita

Richard Hermes holds a master of fine arts degree in fiction writing from the University of Minnesota, where he won the Gesell Award for Excellence in Fiction. His other awards include the *Phoebe* Fiction Award, *Minnesota Monthly*'s Tamarack Award, and a Luce Scholars fellowship to Thailand, where he lived and worked for eight years. He was the editor-in-chief of the tenth-anniversary issue of *Grist: A Journal of the Literary Arts*, which won the 2018 Parnassus Award for Significant Editorial Achievement from the Council of Editors of Learned Journals.